

# **“Heal Thyself” – Effective Elearning**

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## **ABSTRACTS**

As Universities across the Commonwealth respond to increasing demands for efficiencies in learning delivery the demand for ‘training’ in eLearning grows. This paper advocates that Institutions respond to this professional development need themselves rather than outsourcing this provision. Context is all-important in ensuring that underlying cultural change is effective.

## **INTRODUCTION**

University education faces serious pressures from within and without. The challenge from within comes from the increasingly sophisticated student who brings ‘communications and technology experience’ to University with a consequent rise in expectations. From without the challenge comes largely from policy makers who have identified technology as presenting new economic models for educational delivery, the suggestion that everyone can access a global market, and that the collective ‘power’ of academics might be less threatening when students can access learning on-demand.

These pressures will disrupt and change the roles that exist in our Universities. Many individuals are threatened by the challenge to their personal identity, of what it means to be an ‘academic’ (Taylor 1999). As roles are reassessed so identities are perceived to be at risk, there is a fear of being devalued or deskilled by technologies that produces resistance to those same technologies. Institutions have also within them a new breed of learning and teaching employee, the learning technologist or eLearning advisor, and these staff are also seeking to establish their professional identity, to be valued for the contribution they make.

The introduction of new technologies into the learning environment is not a neutral activity without consequences; rather it represents personal and political interests with a good deal at stake. Within the educational technology community there are strong partisan positions being drawn up in favour of

particular metadata frameworks, learning object definitions and, perhaps most obviously, the often evangelical advocacy of online discussions or Computer Mediated Conferencing (Lisewski and Joyce 2003). An institution wishing to adopt eLearning, even those with the laudable intention of enhancing the quality of the learning experience, must consider the impact on existing academic practice, quality enhancement processes, accreditation systems and indeed the very culture of the organisation.

This paper offers a personal perspective on a formal continuing professional development programme offered by the University of Hull, and plans to develop a more contextualised programme to affect institutional change.

## **RESPONDING TO THE ELEARNING CHALLENGE**

The University of Hull was established in 1929 in what was then one of Europe's largest fishing ports on the Humber estuary. The University is now a significant element in regional regeneration plans in a region which has suffered severe economic decline but which is now a focus of technological innovation in high-speed internet, broadband and interactive television provision. The University boasts more than 15,000 students, many from the region itself and increasingly defying the 'typical' profile of the 18-21 year old full-time student. A large proportion of the student population is mature part-time or work-based.

The University of Hull has been a significant innovator in eLearning with the early development of "Merlin –World Class" in 1995-97 in association with British Telecommunications (<http://merlin.hull.ac.uk>). Merlin is a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) modeled on the Conversational Framework approach (Laurillard 1999) developed within the context of language learning but currently being used by a number of Universities and Colleges in subjects as diverse as Legislative Studies, Psychology and Teaching Training. In 2000 the University also began using the commercial Blackboard VLE and by January 2004 there were over 2600 active Merlin users and 11,000 Blackboard users at the University of Hull.

Between 1997 and 2002 a range of staff development opportunities were created around the Merlin VLE. The staff using this particular environment and its pedagogical framework were early adopters of the e-moderated online discussion. In late 2002 the University decided to develop its existing staff development programme, entitled Foundations in Online Learning and Teaching (FOLT) into a programme for a Masters of Education in eLearning delivered entirely online through the Merlin VLE. The proposal was discussed

between the staff that originally 'owned' the FOLT course and management in the Centre for Learning Development (CLD), the educational development unit, and the Centre for Educational Studies (CES), an academic teaching department. The intention was to plan, implement and review an online Masters in eLearning from within CLD, to be delivered using CLD staff with CES staff making a teaching contribution where appropriate. The reason for this was essentially political rather than academic, since the CLD staff designated to teach the programme modules were in a service unit that could not easily handle student income. The CES on the other hand was an academic unit running a series of Masters level programmes in education. It was the intention of the original programme designers that after the first 12 months of initiating the FOLT programme at Masters level, the programme would be revised and made available to other academic groups within the University, thus supporting the work of other departments.

I took up the appointment as Head of eLearning at the University of Hull on June 1st 2003 and took the position of effectively being the Programme Director for the proposed Master of Education in eLearning. In August 2003 the Centre for Educational Studies changed leadership and a new Head of Centre wished to consolidate programmes within their own management structure with the result that a new Programme Director was appointed from within CES.

During the intervening two months I had undertaken a somewhat heuristic evaluation of the usefulness of the FOLT module for staff development purposes within the University and proposed significant changes. Institutionally the political imperative for developing the programme was not in doubt, the activity was planned in response to the University's eLearning Strategy (June 2002) and supported the internal institutional positioning of the Centre for Learning Development as an agent of change. It also aimed to ensure that academic departments could deliver on their expectations to implement the eLearning Strategy at Faculty and Departmental levels. The original programme designers sought to prepare a generic teaching resource that could be adapted to provide a range of specialist academic content. I concluded however that the 26-week programme of exclusively online activities, tasks and readings, brought together through online exchanges represented only one very narrow dimension of the eLearning experience. Taken in the context of a full six modules of a Masters programme this was entirely acceptable, and has proved invaluable for many participants, but as a means of identifying changing roles within the institution and facilitating cultural change it was deemed not to be appropriate.

There is a need to confront directly the challenge to institutional identities which new technologies represents. Professional development programmes

must address the learning design function of academics rather than the issue of technology adoption or the modeling of one online pedagogical model. Those institutions that advocate that the design and comprehension of learning outcomes be at the heart of course design must model this in their internal professional development programmes too. The need to ensure a sound pedagogical design is especially important in an institutional staff development programme which participants will undoubtedly see as modeling good practice.

## **LEARNING DESIGN AND LEARNING TECHNOLOGIES (LDLT)**

The LDLT programme is intended for introduction in September 2004, initially in a non-accredited mode for its developmental year, but as a 20 credits Masters level module offering professional accreditation in its subsequent implementations. The programme is designed for learning support staff working with educational technologies to engage in the practicalities of learning design, and for academic staff with varying degrees of learning design experience to reflect on the implications of emerging technologies. The programme offers a place where the different 'camps' identified in the introduction might meet.

The University of Hull has an existing involvement with the Staff and Educational Development Association (SEDA) that provides a "framework to support the planning, operation and recognition of professional development for staff working in higher education". SEDA is the professional association for staff and educational developers in the UK, promoting innovation and good practice in higher education. Within this framework the LDLT will provide a pathway to the 'Embedding Learning Technologies Award' offered by SEDA which "supports and assists the continuing professional development of any individual who is actively involved in the embedding of learning technologies into higher education including lecturers, educational technologists, learning professionals, C&IT developers".

Programme design is increasingly affected by the demands of external quality and accreditation agencies in higher education, and the political and funding bodies whose priorities they reflect. For this reason alone it is pragmatic to engage in a formal framework such as the one provided by SEDA, but it is also worth noting that the prospect of professional accreditation can be highly motivating to some staff, and that the structure of assessment values offered by the SEDA award framework is available to drive the design of the LDLT

programme.

This differs from the familiar approach to the unfortunately persistent tendency for University course design to identify content and deliver it, incrementally, “brick upon brick” (Rodgers 1969). Both emerging best practice in new technologies and the changing nature of the student body and their expectations is now challenging this approach. However course design might still be said to rest on the simple relationship between content and assessment; “what content do I have?” and “how do I know if I have been successful in ‘delivering’ it?” Increasingly we have seen a desire to encourage a stronger developmental relationship between these two questions and to reconceptualise them as: “why have I chosen to teach this content in this way?” and “ what are the measurable outcomes and how will I measure them?”. The extension of these questions leads us to move away from the content driven course towards learner-centred course design. Four questions emerge as a model for programme or course design:

- What purpose (educational) does the course serve?
- Which learning experiences need to be provided to serve that purpose?
- How should these experiences be managed and organised?
- How might these purposes be deemed to have been attained?

These questions, derived from Gill Nicholas (Nicholas 2002), can appear deceptively simple but adopting a framework, such as SEDA, ensures one is already benefiting from the collective expertise of experienced colleagues, whilst retaining the notion that such a framework is always developmental. Many course models risk becoming fixed and can encourage a linear and mechanistic approach to the supporting content required to reach their objectives. It is important that content ‘serve’ the programme or course, not become the driver for it. This is a major conceptual change for many academic staff, but it also a warning to those advocating the industrial model of production, a world of decontextualised learning objects. The advantages of adopting a value framework to facilitate design do not disguise the difficulties of adapting established accreditation frameworks and mapping them to institutional assessment criteria.

The Dearing Report (NCIHE 1997) focused the developmental processes in Higher Education in the United Kingdom on learning outcomes, identifying the need for explicit programme specifications. In the professional development field it might be said to be unwise to over-specify the aims and outcomes of a programme as there must be an expectation that the individuals own personal

development pathway will determine their outcomes and objectives. Identifying programme aims that do not over-rule the personal needs of the individual can prove difficult. Whilst the language of objectives, outcomes and aims is continuously evolving in the education literature, certain themes do remain constant. Blooms taxonomy is still relevant today in helping classify and formulate learning outcomes, suggesting as they do the need to balance cognitive, affective and psychomotor aims (knowing, feeling and doing). We can question however, whether the real separation of these three notions in practice is appropriate or realistic. Our course design should then consider the extent to which the learning experience makes use of aims that might be categorised as:

COGNITIVE (knowing)	AFFECTIVE (feeling)	PSYCHOMOTOR (doing)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• knowledge</li> <li>• comprehension</li> <li>• application</li> <li>• analysis</li> <li>• synthesis</li> <li>• evaluation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• receiving</li> <li>• responding</li> <li>• valuing</li> <li>• organising</li> <li>• characterising</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• initiatory behaviour</li> <li>• pre-routine behaviour</li> <li>• routine behaviour</li> </ul>

After Bloom (Bloom 1964)

In the case of the LDLT course built around the SEDA framework for the 'Embedding Learning Technologies' award (ELT) we have a series of programme and specialist (individual) outcomes as well as 'underpinning values' being specified:

'Development outcomes' suggest that participants will have:

1. Identified their own professional development goals, directions or priorities
2. Planned their initial and / or continuing professional development
3. Undertaken appropriate development activities
4. Reviewed their development and their practice, and the relations between them

'Specialist outcomes' state that participants in an ELT programme will have:

1. Conducted a review of C&IT in learning and teaching and shown an understanding of the underlying educational processes
2. Analysed opportunities and constraints in using C&IT and selected C&IT appropriate to the learning situation

3. Designed a learning resource, programme or activity to integrate appropriate C&IT
4. Implemented a developed strategy
5. Evaluated impact of the interventions
6. Disseminated and embedded the findings of the evaluation

The 'Underpinning Values' state that participants must demonstrate a commitment to:

1. An understanding of how people learn
2. Scholarship, professionalism and ethical practice
3. Working in and developing learning communities
4. Working effectively with diversity and promoting inclusivity
5. Continued reflection on professional practice
6. The development both of people and of educational processes and systems

*SEDA – (www.seda.ac.uk 16/12/2003)*

There is a recognition here of the need to cover a broad range of outcomes with both deep (higher level) cognitive domains and surface (lower level) domains dealing with factual knowledge being represented. To see the value of the outcomes stated here we look a bit beyond Bloom and consider the work of Biggs on deep and surface learning. Biggs (Biggs 1987) suggested five levels of learning;

5. Increasing knowledge
6. Memorising
7. Acquiring procedures
8. Abstracting meaning
9. Understanding reality

He suggests that the first three are 'surface' approaches dealing essentially with facts, and the last two with the 'deep' application of these facts. In this context it is essential that a CPD programme aimed at allowing University learning and teaching staff to 'embed' educational technologies in their teaching practice should encourage deeper applications of understanding. The programme must allow all teaching and learning staff to think as educational technologists think and to understand how learners learn. It must also allow the learning technologist participant to appreciate the academic perspective. The stress is not on teaching a skill such as web design but an understanding of the means by which students might use web delivered learning to develop an understanding of the teaching materials, and what those teaching materials need to teach.

The learning outcomes we have established, or in this case agreed to adopt, provide an opportunity to direct the sequencing of the course, develop learner experiences (activities or interactions) to engage with these outcomes, develop a conceptual model to lead students to explore the knowledge required and structure the delivery of learner support services.

The LDLT course is intended to last one academic year, nine months, and will revolve around a series of 'open' seminars, workshops and visiting speakers dealing with a full range of themes affecting learning technologies from assessment design, learning outcomes, activity writing, cultural diversity and so on. Each of these face-to-face activities, between fifteen and twenty will be accompanied by an online content resource of related materials and readings, and a discussion environment. Participants in the LDLT course, as opposed to the open CPD programme, will also work within the Merlin VLE in a practitioner group of academic and non-academic colleagues (Wenger 1999) to create reflective portfolios around scenarios developed to illustrate an application of the theme being dealt with.

## **SCENARIO-BASED LEARNING IN CPD**

Problem-based learning (PBL) is an established teaching strategy in medicine (the new Hull-York Medical School adopted an entirely PBL approach to its undergraduate medical degree launched in September 2003). PBL is recognized less for its potential in CPD programmes despite its focus on the types of problems that a professional is likely to encounter in 'real-life'. The LDLT programme will adapt PBL to develop 'scenario-based' learning opportunities through PBL style group activities. Reflecting on work of Boud and Feletti, PBL suggests an approach that re-enforces many of the outcomes and values of the LDLT programme, insofar as;

- CPD learners would themselves decide what they need to learn in relation to the problem posed;
- Participants would work in small groups exploring how knowledge is acquired and shared;
- Colleagues synthesizing, evaluating and reporting information to each others;
- The programme facilitator taking a non-didactic role.

(Boud and Feletti 1996)

In my opening paragraphs I wished to reflect the very dynamic and uncertain nature of course development in our Universities and I suggest that scenario-based learning avoids many of the dangers of more traditional methods that risk reflecting knowledge as 'inert'. Gale, Hayes, Entwistle and others have

repeatedly cited the disconnectedness, the lack of vocational relevance, of much of what is taught in traditional lecture mode. In the context of the LDLT programme it is essential that participants be discouraged from 'retreating' to their disciplines and circumvent the challenges of other contexts to develop the deeper perspectives on technology enabled learning. The scenario-based approach will not only to foster teamwork, deeper reasoning skills and create positive attitudes to professional development, but is intended to introduce good action research practices to course participants. One of the criticisms made of PBL, that there is insufficient time to treat enough problems or case studies, should be overcome by the 9 month timescale proposed for the LDLT programme during which seven to ten problem based scenarios would be examined.

The intention is to develop an approach that encourages the learners not simply to seek solutions to their implementation of learning technologies alone, but to reflect on the learning process itself. The programme seeks to engage learners in conceptual change activities (Linder and Marshall 1997). Learners constructing their own understanding should ideally undergo conceptual changes, and scenario-based learning as a constructivist strategy is very well suited to Gunstone's conceptualisation of meta-cognition when he describes this as being achieved by learners "if they consciously undertake informed and self-directed approach to recognizing, evaluating and deciding whether to reconstruct their existing ideas and beliefs" (Gunstone and Baird 1994). In the LDLT course there is an opportunity to ensure a balance between content learning and process learning. Learners identify the knowledge they need and report to each other on the collective processing of that knowledge. The scenarios, case studies and problems will represent an increasingly complex set of challenges, beginning with realistic but abstracted problems, leading to real-life case studies in which no learner has significant vested interest and ending with problems/case studies created by learners and presented to the peer-group to solve. This approach seeks to combine the best of experiential learning and spiral, incremental, development.

## **ASSESSING LEARNING**

There are clearly difficult issues of validity and reliability in assessment with respect to CPD and I would suggest that peer review is a valid, and reliable (since it evolves naturally over time and context), form of assessment. With reference to the learning outcomes of the course, we can ask ourselves if our assessment strategy is valid in terms of content, predictability and concurrence;

- Does the assessment assess content that was covered?
- Does the assessment predict future performance?

- Is the learning outcome assessed more than once, or one way?

The LDLT course will involve peer review and assessment of seven or more different situations, ensuring that it is not knowledge itself being assessed, but the ability to construct and apply learning. The scenario-based approach advocated allows for learners prior knowledge to be fully utilized, for progression to be measured individually and documented effectively and for that developing knowledge to be recognized both by peers and through professional accreditation.

The assessment structure for LDLT provides no incentive to learners to 'skim the surface' for effect. Indeed the deeper their engagement with the issues facing them the more motivated and satisfying their experience is intended to be. Partlett suggests that the separation of cognitive and affective activity is meaningless and that motivation is "inextricably intertwined" with higher cognitive functions (Partlett and Hamilton 1981). In this case the challenge to complete a practical, 'politically useful', work related programme might be expected to have intrinsic motivation. It also provides an experience that is transferable to other roles and institutions, with a portfolio of reflective observations being developed with each scenario activity encountered.

## CONCLUSIONS

The need for the University of Hull to develop a programme of formal continuing professional development internally to the organisation, when it offers an external accredited programme to professionals in other institutions may seem ironic. However it is clear that the institutional, cultural and political context of learners varies enormously and that a programme that represents a common framework for professionals engaging with eLearning, such as the MEd in eLearning, requires a degree of generalization which will differ from a programme specifically designed to facilitate internal organisational change.

The 'Learning Design and Learning Technologies' programme proposed by the University of Hull is a model of this flexible, responsive, customised approach to facilitate the development of new 'academic identities'. Tempting as it is for institutions to look to the programmes offered by others as ready means of affecting change, there is a clear need to work through the contextual issues affecting learning design staff, both academic and learning technologists, so as to ensure that the 'roles' being advocated are appropriate and meaningful. Whilst many budget holders are keen to suggest that Human Resource departments should 'purchase' programmes rather than 'reinvent the wheel', there is a counter argument that suggests that if the purpose of a programme is

to fundamentally reassess the function and design parameters of 'the wheel' itself, then 'reinventing' is precisely the learning strategy to be adopted.

The extent to which eLearning professional development programmes can be adopted in cultural and institutional contexts other than that in which it was developed is as yet unknown, their pedigree is still uncertain. What can be usefully shared amongst Universities across the Commonwealth is the knowledge of how to design and develop such programmes within our own institutions.

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