

THE UNIVERSITY AS WORKPLACE

Preparing Lecturers to Teach In Online Environments

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Despite its primary function in the delivery of undergraduate and post-graduate programs, together with its role in generating new knowledge through research, the university is also a workplace for the academic staff and others who function within it. Historically, universities, in their role as employer, have a poor record in providing appropriate professional development programs for their employees and, especially, academics, many of whom have no formal qualifications in education. The massive shift in the pedagogy of higher education from a teacher-centered approach to one that is more student-centered and flexible, largely driven by the increasing use of new communication and information technologies, has further emphasized the need for effective academic development programs. This article describes an attempt at Australia's largest university to provide academics with direct experience of learning in a formal online learning environment in order to better prepare them to teach in similar environments.

INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, universities have been structured to deliver a teacher-centered pedagogy that has been reflected in the curriculum and assessment practices, in course delivery methods, and in the very form of the classrooms found on the university campus (Biggs, 1999). As this pedagogical model has been passed down through the generations, universities have done little to maintain or improve the teaching expertise of the academic staff who

are its primary resource. Most notably, a large majority of university academics worldwide continue to hold no formal qualifications in education, the expectation being that pedagogical knowledge and practical skills will be acquired through the accumulated experience of teaching practice.

The idea that the university is more than a place of scholarship is reflected in a gradual shift in the way researchers have viewed the identity of the university. The concept of the "enterprise university" involved in the grow-

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ing global market of international education and, in turn, subject to the forces of economic globalisation that are “reshaping the universities as a place of work” (p. 48), has been proposed by Marginson and Considine (2000). Martin (1999) has explored the ways in which “changing academic work” has unfolded on campuses, and Ramsden (1998) has looked at the outcomes of the teaching and learning process in terms of “academic productivity.” One of the most blunt perspectives on what it means to teach in universities is offered in Cuthbert’s text (1996), which is divided into three key sections: “the workers,” “the work,” and “the work context.” Drawing on that literature, this article commences with the notion that the university is a workplace (however unique) for its academic staff.

However it is viewed, the culture of the university is being dramatically transformed by the introduction of online teaching and learning environments (Driscoll, 1998; Brooks, et al., 2001; McCormack & Jones, 1998). The traditional teacher-centered pedagogy based on the format of lecture and tutorial and its requirement for the student to attend on-campus classes is being eroded as online environments provide learners with greater flexibility over *when*, *where*, *how* and *with whom* they learn. This transformation in the fundamental activity of the university (teaching) represents a massive change for both the institution as the employer and the academics as employees engaged in the business of teaching.

Significantly, in terms of its impact on the instructional techniques of existing academic staff, the emerging pedagogical paradigm represents an order of change not previously experienced. Whereas academics have traditionally progressed from the experience of learning in the classroom to teaching in the classroom, it is not possible to predicate the adoption of online learning environments on the academic’s firsthand experience of such practices. Very few of the current generation of academics have themselves been students in formal online learning programs.

The emergence of a significant online pedagogy raises a host of issues for university teachers concerning the complex and idiosyncratic nature of online learning. How does one’s current teaching practice transfer (if at all) to the online environment? How does one establish a satisfactory relationship and interact effectively online? How does one interpret the actions (or inaction) of the online learner? These are just some of the initial concerns. Clearly, both the operational requirements of the new technology, as well as the pedagogical implications of using it, will place new demands on the teacher. How does one acquire the functional skill, or even determine which skills are essential, to teach in the online environment (a technical issue)? How can the environment be used to enhance the student learning experience (a pedagogical issue)?

The widespread development of online teaching and learning environments—often initiated by institutions for non-pedagogical reasons, such as economies of scale for program delivery, internal program administration, the development of new student markets (Kenny, 2002)—compounds the existing professional development problem confronting universities. Faced with an academic body largely untrained in teaching practice and matters of pedagogy in the prevailing on-campus environment, the institution must now find effective ways to support its academics to become effective online teachers (proficient in both technical and pedagogical matters). And it must do this at a time when the notion of what constitutes effective online teaching is still unresolved. This article will describe an attempt to meet this challenge within Australia’s largest university.

SETTING THE INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT

Monash University is Australia’s largest university, comprising four campuses located within a major city, a further two regional campuses, as well as international campuses in

Malaysia and South Africa (with study centers also established in England and Italy). In 1999, Monash University introduced a Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (GCHE) in an effort to improve the basic teaching qualifications and skills of its academic staff. As a condition of employment, all new academic staff who have a significant teaching role up to the level of Associate Professor must undertake the GCHE within their probationary (three year) period, unless they already possess an equivalent qualification. Staff may apply for Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) against all or some of the program.

The GCHE comprises four units taken over a period of two years and is conducted by the university's Higher Education Development Unit (HEDU), which is broadly charged with improving the quality of teaching within Monash. In designing the GCHE, the HEDU team members specifically sought to provide course participants with a first-hand experience of flexible learning and, in particular, an online learning environment. The aim was to expose academic staff to a range of experiences as "students" and to use online learning environments as their own students would be expected to do. It was hoped this would promote a greater empathy for students learning online and help to inform lecturers about rele-

vant teaching methods that could be applied in their own contexts.

This paper will focus specifically on the conduct of the first unit of the GCHE, which addresses the issue of student learning. However, a brief description of each of the other units is necessary to provide an overview of the program. Table 1 provides an overview of the course structure.

Through this diverse mix of program delivery methods, it is intended that participants in the GCHE will gain wide experience of a flexible learning environment from which they can draw in order to design and teach their own programs.

THE UNDERLYING PEDAGOGY: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH TO LEARNING

For most participants, the initial unit of the GCHE represents their first experience of flexible learning and the use of an online learning environment. The unit commences with a four-day intensive face-to-face program that allows the group to interact and begin working together. The remainder of the 12-week program is conducted online. Participants are also provided with a print-based study guide and a book of readings. Two optional face-to-face

TABLE 1
Overview of Course Structure

<i>Course components</i>	<i>Unit Content</i>	<i>Mode of Delivery</i>	<i>Method of Assessment</i>
Unit 1 Designing for Learning	Personal experience of learning; student learning theory; design of effective learning activities.	Online learning environment—weekly activities, online discussion group; printed study guide & readings; face-to-face seminars	Completion of 12 weekly online activities & final reflective essay.
Unit 2 Teaching for Learning	Effective teaching in various contexts.	Printed study guide; face-to-face observation of teaching episodes.	Direct observation of teaching practice; reflective reports.
Unit 3 Assessing Learning & Evaluating Teaching	Methods of assessment; approaches to evaluation	Online learning environment supported by printed study guide & readings.	Reports on prescribed activities.
Unit 4 Negotiated Project on Teaching Improvement practice.	The process of self-review and improvement in own teaching	Face-to-face consultation; online communication.	Major project report.

seminars are also scheduled for the middle and the end of the unit. Again, the aim is to expose the participants to a wide range of teaching methods and instructional media on the basis of sound pedagogical practice. Prior to commencement of the regular 12-week study block, participants have the opportunity to undertake an introductory program in the use of the university's online platform, WebCT.

Throughout the program, participants are graded on a "satisfactory/unsatisfactory" basis and are required to complete all weekly assessment tasks and to submit a 1500 word reflective essay on their experience of learning in the unit. A deliberate attempt has been made to avoid the possibility of a teacher "failing" a teaching-related activity by adopting this grading method. Where work is considered "unsatisfactory," a participant is encouraged to resubmit work and this approach creates the prospect for dialogue between the teacher and the course participant, and opens the opportunity for improvement.

Although the printed study guide provides all necessary course information and assessment tasks, the primary learning site for participants in the first unit is the online course environment. Based on the WebCT platform, the online course environment provides participants with the following:

- weekly schedule of the compulsory online activities
- An individual online worksite and repository for ongoing and completed activity
- Online links to primary resources and supplementary resources
- A class discussion group
- Support materials for using the online environment

A foundational principle for the design of the first GCHE unit was the importance of retaining the social dimension of learning. Although the flexible learning environment constructed for the unit could enable students

to progress at their own pace, every effort was made to manage the weekly progress of students as members of a defined cohort or student group. This facilitates interaction between participants about common learning experiences or assessment tasks and, in turn, produces a much richer experience for those who engage on this level. Typically, however, not all participants proceed at the desired pace due to personal or professional demands and ultimately the main requirement they have to meet is to complete the program on schedule.

Each week commences with a "broadcast" email message to the participant group, which serves to bring everyone up to date with any procedural matters relating to the unit as well as acting as a polite reminder about the current weekly learning activity and assessment task. In addition, this message often provides issues or questions that are suggested as sources for discussion in the online discussion forum. It should be noted that many participants comment about the positive influence of modeling a weekly message to the group and that they intend to adopt this practice in their own online teaching.

The online learning environment provides each student with access to the weekly learning activity and assessment task. This is usually based on a commentary relating to an issue, which then leads to a prescribed assessment activity. Online reading material may be linked to the weekly site, and the print-based book of readings may also serve as a learning resource. In completing the assessment task, the participant records his or her response in the online worksite. Another guiding principle behind the design of the unit is the notion of retaining the type of interaction that is commonly associated with effective small group learning. Therefore, the online site is designed to allow each student to have open access to the work of all other students. In this way, students can consult the work of colleagues, which has two major benefits. First, students having difficulty with any task can begin by reviewing other contributions. Secondly, and

connected to the first benefit, is the advantage that comes from having access to the work of participants from a wide range of disciplines, as well as different geographical (typically there are participants from most of the city and regional campuses and also the Malaysian and South African campuses) and cultural perspectives.

Participants are encouraged to interact with each other by means of a weekly online discussion group. At times, the discussion is convened in a structured and systematic way with the teacher playing a major role; at other times, the teacher refrains from any involvement, leaving responsibility for the quality and frequency of discussion to the participants. The rationale behind this approach is to expose the participants to contrasting styles of discussion group in order to have them consider the diverse possibilities for their own teaching practice. Often, the unit's teacher has deliberately created problematic episodes or incidents that are subsequently used to draw the participants' attention to underlying pedagogical principles. The overall aim is to have each participant expand his or her understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the online environment.

HOW THE PARTICIPANTS RESPOND TO THE EXPERIENCE OF ONLINE LEARNING

At the conclusion of the first unit, the participants are evaluated anonymously about their experience. One of the questions asked is: Has the experience of learning online changed the way you think about or practice online teaching? The following comments are drawn from the participants' feedback (with their permission) in order to show the variation in the participants' experience of online learning (each comment represents a different respondent):

- Yes, it has made me much more comfortable with the idea of putting some of

my own material online It is also a great way of getting used to WebCT.

- One of the challenges of online learning is to engage the students in online discussion and/or get an exchange of ideas. I think the way in which we were able to see other students' responses to the weekly activities, provided a good model for getting a greater exchange of ideas.
- After one unit I am not entirely convinced of the benefits of online learning as it is a relatively isolated way of learning and it requires quite strong discipline and strong organisational and time management skills.
- It has given me an insight into the experience of online learning but I still have a strong preference for face-to-face teaching and learning.
- I have never participated in a discussion group unit until now and therefore never encouraged or utilized it with students due to my own lack of confidence with it. I now would recommend it and will find ways to implement it.
- It has benefits in terms of discussion groups and being able to view activity responses of other members—very welcome in this course but still unsure if these principles could be applied to this extent within the course I teach.
- It was less daunting than I anticipated but thinking about setting up a course online myself is still terrifying.
- I enjoyed the role that online teaching plays but firmly believe it is a support mechanism rather than a better way of teaching. I will continue to use WebCT as a tool but at this stage will refrain from using the facility as a sole way of teaching.
- [The experience] demonstrated how important positive reinforcement is online.
- It gives me more of an idea as to what would be going through a student's mind when using online resources.

DISCUSSION

The widespread adoption of online teaching and learning environments within universities represents a major realignment of the institution's organizational identity—historically derived from the traditional architecture and pedagogy associated with learning on-campus. In turn, this development creates an immediate need for a suitably resourced and targeted professional development program for academics (and other staff). From the perspective of the university as workplace, the proliferation of online teaching threatens the individual academic's sense of professional identity (e.g., what it means to be a university academic) and the meaning and satisfaction that he or she derives from his or her performance in the workplace (e.g. resulting from the different form of interaction with students), which is consistent with Barger and Kirby's account of the process of change in organizations (1995).

Noting the growing demands on academics and the pressures on their time, Ferman (2002) claimed that professional development should not be implemented as an "extra but rather in a directly work practice-embedded way" (p. 147). Hanrahan, et al. (2001) stressed that professional development for academics is most effective when it is conducted at the "local" level rather than through "centralized, decontextualised programmes" (p. 131). This is effectively what occurs with the GCHE, in which the learning activities and assessment tasks are designed to be contextualized by the individual participant and situated in his or her respective teaching practice.

The content (what is to be learned) in the first unit of the GCHE comprises both the material relating to pedagogical theory and teaching practice, as well as the direct experience of learning in an online environment. The participants' responses to the unit - as reflected in the content of a number of assessment tasks that required a critical analysis, a final reflective essay, and a formal unit evaluation—have been overwhelmingly positive since the program's inception in 1999. Some academics

have also reported using the GCHE online site as a basis for designing their own online course and have also acknowledged deliberately replicating many of the practices to which they had been exposed. This demonstrates the value of modeling professional practice for learners functioning in their workplace situation and has important implications for how similar faculty development programs are conducted at other universities. Reporting an attempt at one university to improve online teaching skills, Kirkpatrick (2001) highlights the value of "identifying and publicizing working models that provide examples of what can be done and how it can be achieved" (p. 175). Significantly, the positive impact of the GCHE is best demonstrated by the fact that two faculties within the university (Law and Medicine) have recently created discipline-specific equivalent programs aiming to service the need for continuing professional development (for their own staff and other professionals) by duplicating large elements of the GCHE program.

Unlike more traditional technology training programs in which the focus is on acquiring technical skills, the success of the GCHE unit lies in the fact that it provides what some researchers have labeled an "authentic activity" (Herrington, et al., 2003). Traditional training programs designed to improve expertise in the use of new technologies are often embedded in the use of that technology but in what have been described as "decontextualised exercises that can be used primarily to practice a skill" (Herrington, et al., p. 59). The capacity of such programs to engage the learner and to result in learning that can be effectively transposed to the learner's operational environment has been questioned. Rather than offering the participant a manufactured scenario in which to gain specific operational skills in online teaching, the GCHE participants engage in actual teaching and learning issues from their own professional situation, which in turn is embedded in the online environment about which they are acquiring knowledge and skills. Herrington and her colleagues describe the benefit for learners experiencing "sustained

scenarios and cases, where students become immersed in problem solving within realistic situations resembling the contexts where the knowledge they are learning can be realistically applied" (p. 60).

It must be stressed that the aim was to provide the GCHE participants with a genuine experience of online learning embedded in the WebCT platform. There was no attempt to serve as the university's agent and to encourage the automatic adoption of WebCT. Instead, the aim was to develop a critical awareness of the complexity of online learning amongst the cohort. Most importantly, the unit can be seen to have met its objective to engage academics in the experience of online learning in order to influence their approach to teaching in similar environments.

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