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Integrating innovation into the mainstream in a faculty of arts: obstacles and opportunities

Abstract
For a university in regional Australia, a new degree program on offer to a remote campus and access centres, provided a supportive environment for faculty to trial new teaching and learning methods, specifically making use of learning management system (WebCT) for aspects of communication and content. This paper examines the impact this had on the faculty, in particular at the increased usage of ICT in subjects on offer on campus and examines issues such as workload and curriculum redesign that were identified as problematic by faculty as they embraced innovative methods of teaching and learning.

Keywords
off-campus teaching, satellite campus, teaching innovation, community of practice

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INTEGRATING INNOVATION INTO THE MAINSTREAM IN A FACULTY OF ARTS: OBSTACLES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract: For a university in regional Australia, a new degree program on offer to a remote campus and access centres, provided a supportive environment for faculty to trial new teaching and learning methods, specifically making use of learning management system (WebCT) for aspects of communication and content. This paper examines the impact this had on the faculty, in particular at the increased usage of ICT in subjects on offer on campus and also examines issues such as workload and curriculum redesign which were identified as problematic by faculty as they embraced innovative methods of teaching and learning.

Introduction

The Faculty of Arts engages in the delivery of an undergraduate degree to a remote campus and three access centres at varying distances from the main campus. The degree is now in its fifth year of implementation, with its first graduates at the end of 2002, with a few continuing to undertake an honours year. The Bachelor of Arts (Community and Environment) has transcended the status quo of teaching and learning on the main campus in a number of areas:

- It is a new degree program and is only on offer off campus
- It is interdisciplinary
- It uses innovative teaching and learning practices
- It takes advantage of the availability of new technologies for teaching and learning, including web-based learning and videoconferencing
- The subjects have often been collaboratively developed with other staff from inside and outside the faculty including the library, learning development and educational development (See Albury, Lefoe, Littler, & Trivett, 2001; Curtis, Lefoe, Merten, Milne, & Albury, 1999).

The literature abounds with tales of innovation in teaching and learning in higher education, and with the many success stories individual faculty or 'lone rangers' achieve using technology to support and improve learning (Alexander & McKenzie, 1998; Taylor, 1998). Some higher education institutions acknowledge that for these innovations to be mainstreamed however, there needs to be a more collaborative approach to change, and that where a group of innovative individuals work together for a common goal, this is more likely to achieve the continuation of the innovation after the initial implementation (Collis & De Boer, 1999; Sorg et al., 1999; Taylor, 1999a). At the University of Wollongong, as the rhetoric changes from innovation to mainstreaming, a number of questions surface about the future of this innovative degree. Most certainly a key one from a faculty and a staff development perspective, is concerned with the impact the degree program had on teaching and learning in the Faculty of Arts since its implementation in 2000.

During an initial interview the (then) Dean of Arts identified one of the key purposes of the innovation

> For me personally I was convinced about it [the innovation] because I saw it as a good way into changing and rethinking the ways in which humanities and social sciences could be taught. So not simply a matter of delivery but really an opportunity to rethink what it means to teach and in some ways it's providing a, I can't say teaching qualification, but a teaching experience for people. The opportunity to think differently about their teaching (Interview with Lefoe, January, 2000).

The academic staff engaged in the early planning workshops to develop the new degree also indicated the importance of this impact on campus when they anticipated future outcomes through the completion of a Goal Attainment Scale (Curtis, 1998). They stated that if achieving better than expected then:

> Curriculum delivery in Nowra has revolutionised on campus offering. Arts is in high demand and staff numbers are expanded. Production of subjects has facilitated efficient technological cross fertilisation in both curriculum design and student learning capabilities. The Nowra Arts degree is better than on campus degree and hosts top honours students." (March, 1998, Working party minutes, attachment.)

At management and grass roots level there was a recognition that this program would provide an opportunity to try out new ideas about teaching and learning, and in particular to use information and communication technology (ICT) in a supportive environment. This paper examines how well predictions for the future match realities four years into the new degree program. Whilst acknowledging four years is probably too early to anticipate a major flow on to mainstream of the innovation, it provides opportunity to reflect on what has happened and perceptions of the current status on campus in the Faculty of Arts. There are too many variables to attribute all changes to teaching and learning in the faculty to this innovation, but the main players have certainly been people willing to take a lead role in the faculty especially in incorporating the use of technology in their subjects, in supporting their colleagues and in sharing their knowledge of teaching and learning with other academics both within the institution and without.

This paper provides a reflection on the impact on teaching and learning on campus of insights developed by the current practice of off campus teaching in the Faculty of Arts. The authors acknowledge that not all of the change to teaching practice can be attributed to the off campus developments. Nevertheless, we believe that the rapid take-up of new teaching and learning methods, in particular the use of ICT in the on campus environment, has been driven by the necessity to use these methods with these students at remote centres. The need to learn collectively how to teach in remote centres provided a group of academic staff with a safe and supportive environment to trial new teaching methods. Development of a new degree to be delivered using ICT provided a focus for curriculum change in the Faculty of Arts.

Context: the Innovation

Many Australian universities in a context of diminishing government funding have been able to attract growth funds through expansion of their offerings to rural and remote areas or areas with perceived disadvantage by providing satellite campuses and access centres to attract local students (Chalmers, 1999; DEET & Baldwin, 1992; Fuller, 1996; Taylor and Blaik, 2001). For the University of Wollongong, the provision of growth funds to expand offerings on the south coast, the far south coast, and the southern highlands of NSW through a new campus and access centres provided an environment for academic staff to rethink their teaching. Many of the subject developers trialed new methods of teaching and learning, in particular using WebCT, a course management system, with their on campus students prior to the opening of the centres in 2000 and continued as each year of the degree program was implemented. Some of the earlier findings have been reported elsewhere (Albury et al., 2001; Lefoe, Gunn, & Hedberg, 2002).

The faculty engaged in the development for this degree displayed a very strong commitment to their teaching through what can only be described as some challenging times. After several years of discussion, a committee in the Faculty of Arts finally agreed on the subjects for a new degree program, Bachelor of Arts (Community and Environment). The degree was one of two on offer to provide access to higher education for students on the south coast and southern highlands of NSW. There was to be a degree of flexibility in the delivery, though certainly anticipating low initial numbers meant that the subjects on offer would always be very limited.

In this particular project, the innovators who were often junior academics did not necessarily practice the more traditional methods of teaching, which were the established methods of the disciplines. Many of the more senior members of the disciplines were reluctant to engage in or support the interdisciplinary discussions that were a key part of the development phase of the degree. Certainly the concept of crossing the tribal boundaries through interdisciplinary subject development in Arts has been the subject of earlier discussion in the literature (Becher, 1989). In particular this may impact on new academic staff who may do so inadvertently, as well as crossing other tacit boundaries by making teaching their focus rather than research, and by using technology in their teaching in a department where the culture may frown on such innovative practices. In a research study on innovation in higher education, Hannan and Silver identified the reasons innovative teachers will take on such a challenge:

> It seems that innovators will take on extra work, learn new skills, court unpopularity with other staff and take risks with their own careers so long as they feel that by doing so they can improve the quality of their teaching, and/or, if they feel that circumstances are such that they have no choice but to depart from their old methods to cope with new demands (Hannan & Silver, 2000 p32).

The innovation in this context involved thinking about new ways to deliver subjects where the learning environment is distributed across place and time. It involved finding ways to use technology, not only to provide content to students through such things as e-readings, but also to support communication between lecturers, tutors and students. It involved thinking about ways to modularise subjects so that relevant modules could be used for different cohorts and finally being flexible about teaching methods used, in particular recognising that videoconferencing could not be used for lecturing but was a great tool for occasional meetings with students and tutors for discussions. Whilst the faculty did not have strong ownership of the project because the decision to proceed had been made at a higher level, ultimately the leadership provided at the faculty executive level meant the development team took ownership and supported each other through the development phase of the new degree.

Impact on Campus Teaching

Although only four years into the innovation, we are beginning to see evidence of the impact on teaching in the Faculty of Arts, through a number of areas. The impact falls into three categories. The first was the development of a community of practice, initially among those in the South Coast Project followed by an expansion of the group which later waned; second, in the rewards and recognition achieved by the individuals involved in the innovation and finally in the recognition of the increased workload for those engaged in teaching off campus.

Building a Community of Practice

The establishment of a community of practice was central to the ability of the relatively junior academics involved in the original project development group to rethink and transform their curriculum development and teaching practices to meet the challenge of the distributed learning environment (Albury et al., 2001; Curtis et al., 1999). The characteristics of a community of practice (Stuckey, Hedberg, & Lockyer, 2001; Wenger, 1998) were strongly in evidence amongst the group

- a clear purpose driven by the members,
- employment of appropriate technologies and styles of communication,
- membership of a social network where their expertise, leadership, content and contributions are valued, and
- providing ongoing discussion, sharing of, and collaboration on, commonly valued things.

The members displayed a willingness to expand the community as new staff members joined and other faculty members displayed an interest in becoming involved.

The commitment by the Faculty to a degree program offered through a network of access centres required a commitment to the institutionalisation of innovations regardless of the academic staff involved in teaching and a change in the accepted assumptions about ‘ownership’ of subjects.

During the development phase of the degree the regular meetings of the South Coast Project developers group created a safe place to explore those assumptions and to try new ideas. The most active members of that group began to explore the similarities and differences among the disciplinary approaches to knowledge represented in the group (e.g. History, English Literature, Sociology), to discuss and experiment with innovative teaching techniques using ICT as well as print materials and to support each other in most aspects of academic life. They began to trust and work with members of academic and student support units outside the faculty to improve their teaching materials and student learning outcomes and to understand a broader view of academic work within the University. They examined closely the way new technologies could support this change. The camaraderie of the group work led some to identify themselves as 'core developers'. The enthusiasm led several to discuss the issues within their teaching programs and with other like-minded academics. They also applied their knowledge of innovation to the delivery of on campus subjects in ways ranging from introducing electronic discussion elements to developing an on line library assignment that is transferable between subjects. The combination of talk and demonstration of innovation drew others to rethink their own teaching.

The rethinking does not constitute a revolution in modes of teaching and learning but a more modest beginning at reworking the 'web of rules' in which the Arts academics work (Taylor, 1999b). New staff joining the faculty have been attracted to the energy and support for learning to use ICTs in education as well as the small financial support for curriculum development within the South Coast initiative. The activity viewed by long term academics in the faculty as a new and worrying development is regarded by the newcomers as an established part of academic work in Arts that offers an opportunity for career development on the cutting edge of current academic practice. In addition, the core subjects in the degree must be taught even when the original subject developer is on study leave. This has meant that academics outside the original South Coast group have been recruited to coordinate a subject for one session only. That role allows them to explore the technology without the commitment to subject development. Even this level of engagement with the distributed learning environment challenges some to rethink aspects of their teaching, and has convinced at least one lecturer of the value of the project as a contribution to his teaching practice (Trowler, 1998).

Academics from the original group of developers have become formal or informal teaching mentors for their colleagues, discussing teaching issues, assessment tasks and ways to use an appropriate level of technological support in their subjects. Some of the 'core developers' became known as experts in the use of WebCT and acted as consultants to colleagues who were uncertain about using the new technology. They have also provided connections with members of other units who can provide the necessary skill development and support. The uptake of the use of ICTs on the Wollongong campus has taken a different form than the South Coast teaching. Lecturers have been drawn to ICTs for reasons that may at first seem peripheral to rethinking 'what it means to teach'. One felt compelled to establish a support web site for his first year subject as a result of the demands by students who had studied a subject coordinated by one of the core developers during the previous semester. For others, having a subject website reduces the burden of heavier teaching loads by having the subject outline and some set readings available electronically.

Certainly the number of WebCT subject sites supporting teaching and learning in the Faculty of Arts has increased from 18 sites in 2000, to 43 in 2001, 47 in 2002 and 51 in 2003. Optional use of sites has decreased whilst there is an increase in sites used for content and communication. As the university quality assurance processes improve, other data is becoming available as to how the sites are used in teaching from initial optional use in subjects to a variety of uses, as indicated in Table 1.

Type of use	Number of subjects	
	2002	2003
Participation online is optional for students	16	13
Students must use the web to interact with the educational content necessary for study	8	10
Students must use the web to communicate with staff and/or other students	4	4
Students must use the web to both interact with content and to communicate with staff and/or other students	19	24

Table1. Subjects with WebCT use in Faculty of Arts, 2002

At the same time, staff working on subject delivery for the access centres have continued to collaborate with members of units outside the faculty to improve teaching and learning. One staff member has been revising her subject in collaboration with a member of the Learning Development group to include more formal scaffolding of the generic skills developed within the subject. Two others have spent time as Fellows with Centre for Educational Development and Interactive Resources (CEDIR), working with the technical staff to develop learning objects that have applicability beyond their subjects – each with a third collaborator from another unit. The development of a shared vision, as identified by Senge (1992) and Fullan (1993), has underpinned the innovation, whereby a broad commitment has eventually developed in the wider group as people have identified aspects of the project which reflect their own beliefs. Whilst engaging a wider ownership of the innovation beyond the initial development group has been challenging, Trowler (1998) points out that ownership and understanding are "developed and sustained by hands-on experience and by giving room for experimentation and adaption" (p154).

As the innovation becomes mainstreamed the community of practice has waned. In 2003 there were few postings to the listserver which provided a conduit for discussion and less informal discussion within the faculty of the South Coast Project. The need to sustain the community is no longer there as the practice of using technology becomes part of teaching and learning within the faculty (Wenger, 1998) and the faculty members focus on other issues.

Rewards and Recognition

Researchers point to the lack of reward and recognition within the formal structures of the institution as one of the biggest obstacles in the path of innovation in higher education (Hannan & Silver, 2000; Silver, 1998). In spite of resistance from many colleagues early in the project, participants in the BA on the South Coast have not suffered the extremes of lack of recognition experienced or feared elsewhere. All Faculty of Arts academics involved in the original 1998 – 1999 group of subject developers, who applied, had their probationary contracts converted or achieved a promotion. In 2002 two subject coordinators won the Vice Chancellor's award for Outstanding Contribution to Teaching and Learning (OCTAL) for their innovative collaboration in Australian Studies. The Coordinator of the Bega Education Access Centre and the Librarian at one campus received General Staff Awards in 2002 for their contributions to the success of the programmes. A human geographer previously won an OCTAL for his subject now offered as a part of the BA and an Australian Publishing award for the textbook for that subject. The three OCTAL winners were nominated by the University for National Teaching awards. In addition to the personal recognition for members of the group, four projects led by South Coast academics have received internal educational strategic development funding to extend innovations to wider groups within the faculty or the University. Six students from Bega, Batemans Bay and Nowra were on the Dean's Merit List for the top 5% of students in 2001 and one of these students won an award for the highest average mark over three years of study across all students in the Faculty of Arts.

Members of the South Coast subject developers and coordinators group have been invited to make presentations to key teaching and learning events on campus including the Vice Chancellor's Symposium on Innovative Teaching and Learning, the University Education Committee and the compulsory Introduction to Tertiary Teaching course for new staff. They are invited to contribute their expertise to new groups of subject developers from other faculties and to international visitors in the field of technological innovation in teaching and learning. These forms of personal and public recognition have contributed to the confidence of many of the subject coordinators who feel able to

intervene in policy discussions about teaching and learning on the basis of their experience. They are able to see some of the opportunities as well as threats that are a part of the changing higher education sector.

Acknowledgement of Workloads

Workload allocations, which reflect the changed nature of the work (Coaldrake & Stedman, 1999; McInnis, 2000) and policy changes, which reflect the changed role of the subject coordinator in a distributed learning context (Collis and Moonen, 2001; Harrison & Brodeth, 1999; Shotsberger, 1997) are issues identified elsewhere. For the Faculty of Arts the issue was raised consistently in a number of forums by those engaged in teaching off campus. Recognition for the increased workload was finally provided in 2004 when the hours allocated for off campus subject administration were doubled compared to an on campus subject though only a minimal increase was received for actual teaching of the subject reflecting the increased use of technology in on campus subjects.

Lessons Learned

The delivery of a degree program at a distance has identified many assumptions, processes and policies on campus that need to be changed to better support teaching, especially innovative teaching. At the faculty level there needs to be a better understanding of the teaching and subject administrative demands of teaching in a distributed learning environment and better processes and policies to support those demands. At the university level, the need for reform is more complex including a variety of administrative issues, a funding model that maintains the support for high quality subject delivery, support for an ongoing cycle of review and improvement and a developed policy of technical support that includes infrastructure and support personnel. A curriculum review process is in place for 2004 which may address some of these issues.

In spite of the recognition of the achievements of the group, until 2003 within the faculty the formal workloads agreements were based on the assumptions of conventional pattern of lectures and tutorials with face-to-face teaching. Those who taught differently were required to negotiate any differences in the workload by explaining their practice in terms of the conventional pattern. In the face of increasing student numbers and thus workloads on campus, members of the South Coast group made a submission to the Faculty workloads committee. The new workload document acknowledged the increased administration to communicate with tutors and students at a distance but indicated that the use of technology in teaching should be accounted for as normal teaching activity.

Another issue, which had to be addressed at the institution level, was the need for ongoing tutor training at the remote centres as there have been limited funds for this training since the first year and only a small number of new tutors to attend training. This did however highlight a need for tutor training and support on the Wollongong campus, where training for all tutors has been implemented across many faculties. In addition, south coast tutors travel to the Wollongong Campus each semester for tutor training and the opportunity to meet the subject coordinators face to face to facilitate communication during the semester.

Where new teaching and learning strategies are developed for off campus modes, the flexibility may suit on campus students as well. Many subjects offered on the South Coast are now taught in the same way on campus. This is not always well received by students, who may not have the same commitment or interest in student centred subjects, which require them to take responsibility for their own learning, especially where a subject may require limited face-to-face contact and be mostly on line, as is the case for two of the subjects.

The south coast implementation has identified many processes and policies on campus that needed to be changed to improve teaching administration. Planning issues which were often solved on the spot in the local situation required specified policies and procedures when other centres were involved eg on campus it is possible to change a class location or time for a tutor to meet the needs of the student group but when there are four other centres involved and a videoconference will run from Wollongong, then timetabling changes become a significant organisational issue.

Policies and procedures are gradually being put into place on campus such as a (draft) statement of the subject coordinator's role and the tutor's role. There are also quality assurance processes in place for initiation of web sites, faculty service agreements for subject level design and support. In addition there is a need for recognition of the requirements of students at a distance by other units who administer within the university (for example, research

ethics approval, careers advice, learning development, etc) some of this is happening, but frequently procedures are not yet in place.

Conclusion

Innovative teaching and learning practices in higher education institutions have frequently been the domain of 'lone rangers' (Taylor, 1998). However for innovative practice to be embraced by larger numbers of faculty, then an environment that supports change is critical. For the Faculty of Arts at the University of Wollongong a new degree program offered to a remote campus and access centres provided an environment for faculty to trial new teaching and learning methods. As these academics found success in their new methods they used them in their on campus subjects as well, and provided support for other faculty members through a community of practice, sharing their new knowledge and skills. As the innovation became part of the mainstream academic activity the community declined but the integration of technology use in teaching has continued to increase.

Whilst new curriculum development has not yet "revolutionalised on campus offering" as mentioned in the Goal Attainment Scale, the on campus offerings in Arts have certainly incorporated new teaching and learning methods at a faster rate than expected. The student numbers have expanded and the faculty has taken steps to acknowledge some aspects of the increased workload. However, Fullan (1993) reminds us that universities cannot mandate the development of skill and commitment, "The only alternative that works is creating conditions that enable and press people to consider personal and shared visions, and skill development through practice overtime"(p23). This initiative has provided such conditions but whether the integration of technology in mainstream teaching is sustainable over time remains to be seen.

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