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Modelling blended learning environments: Designing an academic development blog

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Abstract

A major challenge facing academic developers is meeting the development needs of both time poor academics and those staff in multi-location campuses, especially sessional tutors, who may start teaching several weeks before electronic access is enabled. Necessary restrictions placed on access to local intranet and Learning Management Systems meant rethinking how to meet the needs of all staff and in the process model good practice through the use of blended learning environments. One regional university, with seven national and one international campus, is currently redesigning their staff development program to incorporate the use of blogs and wikis to provide access for all staff to a collaborative space to support improved teaching. This paper provides a rationale for the new direction and outlines the design phase to incorporate the use of collaborative technologies within the staff development program. It outlines the challenges faced in designing the environment and provides an overview of the design for the pilot phase.

Keywords

staff development, blogs, wikis, blended learning environment, sessional tutors

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Modelling blended learning environments: Designing an academic development blog

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A major challenge facing academic developers is meeting the development needs of both time poor academics and those staff in multi-location campuses, especially sessional tutors, who may start teaching several weeks before electronic access is enabled. Necessary restrictions placed on access to local intranet and Learning Management Systems meant rethinking how to meet the needs of all staff and in the process model good practice through the use of blended learning environments. One regional university, with seven national and one international campus, is currently redesigning their staff development program to incorporate the use of blogs and wikis to provide access for all staff to a collaborative space to support improved teaching. This paper provides a rationale for the new direction and outlines the design phase to incorporate the use of collaborative technologies within the staff development program. It outlines the challenges faced in designing the environment and provides an overview of the design for the pilot phase.

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Introduction

Whilst the role of professional development has traditionally been to introduce and facilitate improved teaching practice through face to face workshops, a move to blended environments supported by various technologies provides better access and opportunities for all staff regardless of location or teaching commitments. It also provides opportunities for academics to share their understandings and knowledge whilst developing new conceptions of learning through engagement in a blended learning environment.

Rationale

Current models of professional development for teaching and learning fail to meet the needs of the diverse and mobile workforce in universities. Academic Developers need to model the kinds of design that is required by academics when teaching in multi-location campuses and particularly the move to blended learning environments (Lefoe & Hedberg, 2006). In addition, there is a move away from workshops that focus on information sharing to those that engage in active learning strategies. This encourages participants to become involved in a scholarly approach to their teaching, and to develop support colleagues and networks for “corridor conversations” in the virtual world. The staff development team in a regional university determined that extended programs that combined face to face activities and engaged participants between sessions in social collaboration provided a better opportunity to develop networks and to create the kind of cross disciplinary dialogues we wished to encourage. Following the design phase for this strategy we determined a need for technology to support the initiative and investigated the use of blogs and wikis to support the knowledge sharing and collaboration phase. The paper examines the possibility of using these technologies to support the initiative and follows the process used to identify a suitable tool. The current Learning Management System was deemed unsuitable for the activity because of the determination for the process to be ongoing and the need to situate the program outside of the usual semester times in order to meet the needs of sessional tutors and other academic staff.

Literature review

Whilst many descriptive studies of the use of such technologies for staff development exist, little research has been conducted in the area. Some research has been conducted into the use of such tools within teaching in higher education (see for example, Martindale, 2005; Oravec, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004) and others have looked at the benefits for the professional development of school teachers (Havelock, 2004; Schuck, 2002). There is a general agreement that there is potential for educators at all

levels to support the development of scholarly communities with the careful design of such environments (Segrave, Holt and Farmer, 2005). Segrave and associates suggest a model for Academic Professional Capacities Development and though they describe more broadly how to enhance effective online learning and teaching, they highlight methods and processes which are applicable to our study.

The design of learning environments utilising blogs or wikis is an emerging area for research. Blogs appear to be used as a collaborative or reflective space to support students' reflection on resources and content (Dron, 2003; Williams & Jacobs, 2004). Farmer & Bartlett-Bragg (2005) maintain that the incorporation of blogs allows for the integration of content, communication and participation, breaking down the traditional segregation of these components, which is imposed by a traditional Learning Management System. In order for the effective adoption and utilisation of blog within a course the design and integration of the blog needs to be carefully considered. Bartlett-Bragg (2003) propose an adaptation of Salmon's (2000) model of supporting computer mediated communication in order to facilitate the effective use of blogs within learning. She proposes a five stage integration of a blog into a learning environment: 1. Establishment, 2. Introspection, 3. Reflective monologues, 4. Reflective dialogue, 5. Knowledge artefact. Blogs allow not only the development and sharing ideas within a collaborative environment but also remote access to the information through the use of an aggregator to receive RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds to their desktops, facilitators can post comments remotely and receive email alerts to new postings.

Research questions

There are three key questions driving our investigation in this area and this paper addresses the design phase of the initial research for question three. 1. How can we effectively support academics to transition to new ways of teaching using blended learning environments? 2. How can we model new teaching practices within the staff development program? 3. Can technologies support this transition and if so what are the most appropriate technologies to use? We will conduct an evaluation of the implementation of a pilot phase of the model in 2006 before wider implementation in 2007.

Design phase

The development of the blog was a collaboration between learning designers and academic developers at the university. An initial meeting determined the requirements of the Staff Development Blog:

- To develop a blended model of staff development which offered collaboration, knowledge building and the sharing of resources beyond the face-to-face workshop;
- To model innovative flexible teaching tools which can support collaboration and resources sharing;
- To identify and adopt an easy to use tool;
- To meet the needs of two user groups, staff developers and workshop participants;
- Open access area for sessional staff and others to access without restriction;
- Closed access area for Academic Developers to allow resource sharing and collaborative development of workshops; and
- Externally hosted to allow for pilot and evaluation during refinement and internal hosting in the future.

These parameters guided the investigation and evaluation of a number of blogs and wikis. Edublog was chosen for the task since it met all of the criteria and offered a number of additional useful features such as a wiki (see Farmer, 2005). The results of the evaluation are indicated in Table 1.

Challenges for learning designers

The use of an educational blog presents a number of challenges for learning designers. Whilst the development of the blog was relatively easy, the initial evaluation of the blogs and wikis was time consuming. As emerging technologies, new versions with additional features are constantly emerging. Before designing a blog there is a need to revisit the evaluation of the preferred tools, to identify the new features. Designers need to clearly articulate the educational design needs and evaluate the products according to these criteria.

Table 1: Blog and wiki evaluation

	Elgg	Blogger	Tiddly Wiki	Media Wiki	EduBlog
Easy to use	√	√	√	√	√
Ability to assign categories/tags	√	x	√	√	√
Ability to link docs, graphics, urls etc	√	√	√	√	√
External hosting	√	√	√	√	√
Ability to set access levels	x	√	x	x	√
Customisable themes	√	√	√	√	√
RSS	√	√	√	√	√

When designing the learning experience there is a need to be aware of barriers to effective participation. Previous evaluation of blogs in education has identified a number of barriers. The nature of a blog as a public publishing space can be intimidating for some participants there is a personal expectation of high quality comments which many find intimidating. Reading and contributing to the blog is seen as time consuming. In order to maximise the potential of the blog for professional development both the blog site and the learning design need to be designed and structured effectively. Three areas, learning tasks, supports and resources were considered in the design of the CEDIR academic development blog (Table 2). The design draws on existing support and resources and models effective incorporation of a blog within an educational environment.

Table 2: Learning design

Learning tasks	Learning support	Learning resources
Learning tasks are directed by the relevant academic development activities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blog • Workshop presenters modelling use of tools • Online support and mentoring • Online collaboration between presenters and participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online blog to enable participants to view own, peers and presenters comments • Workshop resources (PPT, doc, images, sound and video) • Links to web based resources • RSS aggregated to individual's computer. • EReadings

Design with Edublog

The support resources and documents provided by Edublog enabled the blog to be designed and established quickly. By utilising the planning questions provided by Edublog, the blog wish list was able to be refined and guide the development of the specific tool. Features, which were particularly useful for the blog, were the categories, pages, links, comments area, search and RSS feeds. The drag and drop linking of resources, email alert for administrators, the ability to contribute remotely and the link to Wikispace were particularly useful. Pages, categories, sub-categories, and links were identified. A site was established and created, a template theme was applied, and the site propagated with initial content. A group of staff participated in an initial evaluation, which led to refinement of a number of features.

Conclusion

As the design phase nears completion, implementation of Edublog for a pilot staff development activity will occur in the second half of 2006. The capacity of the tool to support information and knowledge sharing, as well as opportunities for cross faculty communication and collaboration will be explored in the evaluation of the tool. The next challenge is to examine how we will engage staff in using the tool.

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