Embedding Staff Development in eLearning in the Production Process and using Policy to Reinforce its Effectiveness

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the issues of embedding staff development associated with eLearning in a “production process” and how this needs to be combined with an approach to policy review and formulation designed to ensure policies reinforce rather than inhibit the embedding of staff development outcomes in eLearning practice.

Staffordshire University’s Learning Development and Innovation team has corporate responsibility for eLearning. To ensure that staff development in eLearning is effective, an “integrative development” process for the development of eLearning courses has been formulated. This uses a project management approach to provide bespoke and thus meaningful, engaging and practical training at point of need, via a team-based approach to ensure integrative development of skills and gradual understanding of disciplinary contexts for staff developers enabling them to communicate on “similar wavelengths”. This Project/Team-based approach recognises the importance of a range of skills and makes roles and responsibilities clearer, thus enabling all involved to focus on their areas of greatest expertise, making staff development more focussed, more meaningful, and more effective.

Alongside this work has been carried out in consideration of the role of University policies in reinforcing eLearning staff development ‘messages’. In particular, holistic quality assurance, which assures the staff development through appropriately channelled student feedback, has been developed which focuses on quality of teaching and learning rather than content. Equally, consideration has been made of the associated procedures, which need to allow academics time to focus on teaching and learning (i.e. on course design rather than on the technology).

Addressing both these aspects of staff development has allowed its impact to be more sustained and more effectively disseminated across the institution. The paper will discuss these issues and invite participants to reflect on and share their own contexts and experiences

Introduction

This paper tells a “story” and that story must be read very much in the cultural and organisational context in which it was, and still is being, played out. This is that of a post 92 University of medium size which has been subject to all the challenges that entails. The story is told from the perspective of a team of staff who have, throughout the story, been charged with delivering institutional strategy, as it involves the use of eLearning, from a central role.

The role of what is now called the Learning Development and Innovation Team has therefore covered not just staff development, but the institutional embedding of eLearning. This paper argues that eLearning requires a holistic view of staff development which considers both its organisational impact and its impact on the staff developers themselves, and that there is a need to ensure that Policy is effectively used to ensure that institutional processes interrelate effectively to provide a coherent and supportive context for the development of eLearning.

All this is considered from two perspectives: the place of eLearning in learning and teaching and how appropriate expertise can be developed across the organisation, and how eLearning can be used as a protagonist (or possible a Trojan horse) for changing learning and teaching practice.
eLearning and Strategy

Educational institutions, particularly universities, are quite good a writing strategies, but because they are often written in response to external drivers (for example the award of TQEF funds by HEFCE), they are often not written in a way which recognises the change those strategies require, and seldom include or embrace the management of that change.

As recently as 2002, the lack of institutional strategy was seen as a major barrier to progressing eLearning (Smith, 2002), but since then many, if not most, institutions have either Learning and Teaching strategies which include eLearning, or direct eLearning strategies. However these strategies tend to address the introduction and/or implementation of eLearning and hence fail to address how eLearning might become embedded in institutional practice. The problem of embedding has been widely recognised (DfES, 2003, Stiles 2003). The authors of this paper would highlight the following issues with a strategy only approach:

- Failure to address change management
- No consolidation of progress made
- Failure to learn from experience gained as an organisation (Senge, 1990)
- Staff Development for eLearning seen as a “one-off” process
- Lack of “follow through”
- Little or no evaluation

A brief local history

The process of change that led to the introduction of eLearning at Staffordshire University began in 1996 with the introduction of a (then) radical Learning and Teaching strategy “Building a Learning Community”. This has been described in detail elsewhere (Outram, 2003). This strategy, which had its focus on “learning not teaching”, was revised in 1998 to include the institution-wide introduction of the use of a Virtual Learning Environment and a focus on Resource Based Learning. (Outram, 2003, Stiles 2003, Stiles and Orsmond, 2002).

These overall initiatives did bring about a genuine focus on issues of learning across the University, but did, in hindsight, produce a somewhat content-centric view of eLearning which did not exploit its fuller educational potential for change. One major problem was that both teaching staff and those charged with staff development did not learn well enough from each other. One major cause is seen as the isolated developer or “Fred in shed” approach caused by a focus on in-department projects (Stiles and Yorke, 2003).

However, a more subtle cause is seen as one of “mixed messages” around Quality processes. Although considerable effort was put in on developing these, eLearning was treated separately from mainstream delivery, and the focus was very much on “assurance” as opposed to “enhancement” – whilst “the spirit of continual improvement” was invoked, no processes were put in place to enable its actual incarnation. The process put in place compounded these problems by using “Quality Assurance Checklists”, thus encouraging a focus on issues of content.

The “Traps”

To summarise, whilst the University had got a lot of things right, and by 2000 had reached the point where the use of eLearning was widespread across the institution, it had fallen into a number of traps:

- The content trap – eLearning was focussing overmuch on content and not on the learning experience
- The technology trap – staff were seeing their developmental needs as technological rather than educational
- The accountability trap – the QA processes were not owned by staff, who saw them as “imposed” and “mechanistic” – as a result the process was not always carried out in the intended spirit
- The “isolated development trap” – leading to a failure to learn from each other and spread good practice
The Story Continues…

From 2000 onwards, a number of catalysts for change emerged which drove the University to addressing the issues discussed thus far. These were:

- The development and introduction of “full-tilt” complete distance-learning eLearning awards, which forced issues of course design, delivery and support to be addressed.
- The creation of SURF (Staffordshire University Regional Federation – a directly HEFCE funded HE/FE consortium involving the University and 11 partner FEIs) with its focus on Foundation Degrees and widening participation and inclusion. This raised similar issues to distance learning, but also those of cross-institutional working and cultural differences.

These led to:

- The “Planned Development Process” (Stiles and Yorke, 2003)
- Quality Enhance for eLearning Phase 1
- eL-P2R2 – a review of policies, procedures, roles and responsibilities affecting eLearning (Stiles, 2003)

“Planned Development”

This has been described in detail elsewhere (Stiles and Yorke, 2003) but can be summarised as appointing a Learning Development and Innovation team member as project manager (along with other “experts” from across Information Services) to work with an academic team to carry out the following using a “project management” approach:

- Planning and management of development
- Preparation for approval/validation
- Staff development
- Pedagogy and course design
- Building the VLE course structure
- Identifying and clearing resources
- Content creation
- Populating the VLE course
- Planning induction & delivery
- Supporting delivery
- Supporting monitoring and evaluation

This approach had some considerable success but still had weaknesses and has led to a revised approach.

“Integrative Development”

As can be seen from the above, the process started as a planned and project managed approach. However, it had some important unexpected results.

First of all, it was found difficult to implement a rigid project management framework. With hindsight, this ‘looseness’ should be seen as an important and probably natural characteristic. It was found that the ‘team’ tended to dissipate as the project progressed, with academic staff working largely independently by the end of the project. This, however, is felt to be an indication of the success of the staff development.

What proved important was getting each development off to the right start. This is done by involving all the right people at the start, so they can discuss roles and responsibilities (i.e. what help and support is available), then working together to plan the development to ensure that it is realistic; ensuring that staff development is given the right focus by looking at learning and teaching design first and foremost, and then planning workshops for technical/media development as appropriate – at point of need. The integrative process
clearly separates the technical workshops from learning and teaching design and theory so that technical issues do not distract from this focus.

The other unexpected outcome of the ‘planned’ approach was very important organisationally. As LDI teams join forces with academic teams they are able to understand different perspectives and are able to communicate more effectively on matters of learning and teaching. LDI can and does, for example, run workshops on topics such as ‘Using Blackboard for active learning’, and ‘Using Blackboard to foster critical thinking’.

**The Developers Changing View**

When institutions start to enter into engagement with eLearning, common foci are such things as providing “flexibility” and “access to resources” (JISC, 2003). There are considerable dangers in such foci leading to a very content-centric approach which models the worse of traditional practice (Birchall et al, 2002, Littlejohn 2002, JM Consulting, 2002). More recently there has been the development of major national and institutional foci on “eLearning Strategy” (for example both the DfES and HEFCE are developing such strategies), and much greater attention to “ePedagogy” (for example see the JISC ePedagogy programme).

The authors recognise the laudable intent of these initiatives but would ask that people consider the wisdom of the constant “e” prefix. It is possible that the most important opportunity that eLearning offers may be as a **protagonist for change**. It is felt that the type of approach to development described above can allow tutors to move from a focus on tuition and content to a view which sees that:

> ‘The delivery system is secondary to the type of interactions and intellectual engagement that the system provides both the learner and the teacher… that encourages a focus on ‘the true mission of any educational system, creating an educational event that causes a marked and sustainable change in behaviour’ [Ragan n.d.].

Ragan also states that: ‘good teaching is good teaching’, the authors feel that a better maxim would be ‘good course design is good course design’

**eLearning acts as its own detractor**

An important lesson learned from the experiences described has been that the impact on staff developers engaged in eLearning is that, in exploring its real benefit, it encourages them to move from a view in which it takes centre stage to a view in which it is seen as just another tool in the course design ‘suite’.

**eLearning as a Protagonist for Change**

The work described so far has outlined how eLearning can help create an agile and responsive course development process which promotes a renewed engagement in course design. Staff developers play a pivotal role in both of these, but experience at Staffordshire has led the authors to recognise how important consistent and appropriate organisational practices are in forming the context for developments and influencing the process of cultural change.

**An example – Holistic Quality Enhancement**

Until recently, the “QA context” in which Learning Development and Innovation was operating was one where “QA for eLearning” applied at validation only to those courses which were considered “distance learning” and all other QA for eLearning was applied using a “QA Checklist” at a point immediately prior to delivery. Thus, although issues could be raised at validation about the educational effectiveness of distance eLearning offerings, this often...
meant that such interventions (to highlight problems with course design, for example), whilst valuable, often followed a considerable amount of work by course teams who had worked in isolation, and resulted in considerable avoidable effort and sometimes bad feeling as the validation "evidential" requirements were themselves still content-centric. In the case of non-distance eLearning, the QA Checklist approach was often seen as an imposition, and inventions, coming so late in the day, were sometimes much resented. This approach, as stated earlier, also reinforced a focus on content, and lacked any real "enhancement features".

So, as a result, whilst those course teams who worked with LDI in an integrative development approach were gaining much greater benefits than those that did not, overall the focus was still "assurance" rather than "enhancement".

To ensure that staff development and other supportive interventions could occur as early as possible in the development process, an eLearning threshold statement was introduced as part of a reworking of quality processes. This defined eLearning as where:

“A student cannot reasonably be expected, without due provision of individually focused accommodations (to meet the needs of disability, for example), to meet the learning outcomes of the course without accessing and/or engaging with the electronically delivered and/or supported components of the course.”

This was accompanied by a requirement for those planning new course developments to identify eLearning requirements as part of the academic planning process and to consult LDI at that stage. In addition, validation requirements and the institutional QA handbook were revised to give a focus on the intended "eLearning experience" rather than just on the course content. The point of delivery "QA Checklists" were also changed to focus more on the learning experience and to overtly address course evaluation and enhancement.

Reinforcing the Message – the Place of Policy

As mentioned earlier, a root and branch review - eL-P2R2 - of all institutional policies, procedures, roles and responsibilities that might impinge on the learner’s eLearning experience was started in 2003 (Stiles, 2003). This process, which is still on-going, includes areas such as QA, assessment, the eLearning development process, technical support, academic support, information resources, and the IT support of staff and students. As the process developed, it became clear that the institution lacked something which described the overarching principles to which the conduct of eLearning should adhere. The work of eL-P2R2 was aimed at providing the institution with “horizontal coherence” in its conduct of eLearning, but the organisation lacked “vertical coherence” (Romanainen, 2004) in that, for eLearning, nothing joined the University’s business plans, and the overarching policies that framed the conduct of achieving them, to the strategies that defined its goals and the operational level policies and procedures which governed the work in question. This often resulted in difficulties progressing eL-P2R2-derived changes through committees, and led to incidences of staff resistance to change caused by misunderstandings and a lack of a “big picture”.

As a result, a working group, led by one of the authors, and made up of practitioner representatives of Faculties and relevant services, was created to develop a University eLearning Policy. This policy, recently approved by the University Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee, provides 10 principles which define the way that eLearning, and the use of technology to support learning, will be conducted at the University. Two example principles from the policy are shown below:

Principle 6: The University, through its quality processes, will ensure that eLearning provision meets the standards expected by the University and funding bodies and that
it is accessible, educationally sound, engaging and appropriate to its target populations, whilst ensuring that course developers and those facilitating learning have the scope to innovate and fully employ their professional skills and judgement.

**Principle 7:** To ensure that the potential of eLearning to innovate learning and meet the needs of an increasingly diverse range of potential learners is realised, the University will actively encourage research, scholarship and development in all aspects of eLearning. In addition, it will, via appropriate staff development, ensure all management, administrative, support and teaching staff have the skills, and understanding of each others' roles, required to play their part effectively in the provision of eLearning.

This policy, by providing “the missing link” in organisational coherence, now acts as a significant enabler for future developments by providing rules of conduct for future changes at the operational level and a context for the development of those University strategies which see eLearning as one of the tools to be used in achieving there objectives.

**Conclusion**

The authors would argue that the work above shows the development of an approach which empowers the staff developer by creating a context in which they, those they work with, and the institution, will gain maximum benefit from staff development activities, and that by focusing on the maxim that “good course design is course design”, eLearning can be seen as just one instrument (rather than an exercise in itself) in providing appropriate learning experiences in the context of “lifelong learning”, where the roles of all those involved is both fast changing and increasingly blurred.

**What next?**

Work is far from complete, and, indeed, will never be complete. The areas on which effort is now focussing most intently are:

- Moving forwards and gap filling. Completing the eL-P2R2 work involves insuring the various parts are not merely addressed, but properly connected
- Integrated Quality Enhancement – work on this process is far from complete and work to ensure “the loops” are in place is continuing
- Student evaluation of eLearning – in common with most of the HE sector, the University is still weak in this area which is vital to underpinning work on quality enhancement and course monitoring
- Peer Observation in eLearning – a major challenge on which work has only just begun but which will be important to staff development and quality enhancement
- Assessment in eLearning – not “eAssessment” but the framing of the place of eLearning in the University’s assessment policy and practices.

**References:**


