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Development of the New Academic: The Case for Blended Delivery

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Development of the new academic: The case for blended delivery

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This case study reports the design, implementation and evaluation of an academic induction program, delivered using a blend of in campus and online environments at Macquarie University. The Teaching Induction Program (TIP) was designed to provide professional learning opportunities to novice academics in the Faculty of Business and Economics, particularly sessional staff. A five-point philosophy underpinned the design, ensuring TIP offered a collaborative, reflective, evidence-based, discipline-embedded and student-centred experience. To investigate the effect of the program and in particular the use of digital technology such as wikis, videos and online discussion forums in the delivery of the program, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve program participants. Findings show positive gains in their professional learning, enhancement of their attitudes towards using digital technologies in teaching and learning as well as building a community of practice among sessional staff. This paper argues that blended delivery can be used as an effective and complementary tool to reflectively introduce and engage new academics in their teaching endeavours.

Keywords: Blended delivery, academic development, learning technologies

Introduction

The provision of systematic academic development at the Faculty level is vital to promote higher levels of student learning and engagement, particularly for staff who are new to the field of teaching and learning in higher education (Rust, 2000; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004). It provides them with a range of pedagogical tools aimed at enriching the student experience within their discipline area. In induction programs new staff are introduced to the Faculty culture and available resources, allowing them to grow confidently and professionally in their roles.

There is an increasing level of casualisation in the teaching workforce across all Australian universities (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, DEEWR, 2009) so to meet the needs of this diverse staff body, induction programs need to be delivered in a more flexible manner.

Blended delivery combines a wide range of instructional media delivered both synchronously and asynchronously, with face-to-face interaction, online participation and self-paced learning. As with any other instructional design, to be effective, blended delivery should be adopted in situations where technology can play an incremental role particularly on collective professional reflections (Holton, Coco, Lowe, & Dutsch, 2006). Hence the need to be embedded in firm pedagogical perspectives such as social-constructivism advocating learners' active construction of knowledge, both individually and as a group.

Literature Review

A review of the literature was conducted to investigate institutional practices around blended delivery of professional development programs, particularly in induction programs. The Australian Learning & Teaching Council's (ALTC) project, *Preparing Academics to Teach in Higher Education* (Luzecy & Badger, 2008) is representative of the extant research on induction practices in higher education. That is, while the coverage on issues and programs such as postgraduate courses for academic staff, accreditation, communities of practice, quality assurance and professional development is substantial, induction appears to be fairly under-researched.

In the two latest reviews of the Australian higher education system (DEEWR, 2008, 2009), despite previous DEEWR reports and the increasing concerns for academic standards and quality assurance, there is no mention of academic staff induction. This is also despite the fact that there is growing evidence that providing holistic and effective induction/professional development programs targeting new academic staff as teachers, can support the development of reflective teaching practitioners and support student learning and academic achievement (Rust, 2000; Ho et al., 2001; Gibbs & Coffey, 2004).

The extant literature tends to focus on new academic staff views of an induction program, its design, implementation, impact or effectiveness, as well as conceptualising higher education pedagogies. This research body contains examples of induction programs that conceive teaching as a reflective investigation of student learning (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Kofod, Quinnell, Rifkin, & Whitaker, 2008) and critical self-learning (Ho, Watkins, & Kelly, 2001; Fox, White, Kidd, & Ritchie, 2008). The literature also provides empirical evidence of the significance of induction as a socialisation process within communities of practice (Trowler & Knight, 2000; Green & Ruutz, 2008), conversational frameworks (Simpson, Cockburn-Wooten & Spiller, 2005), departmental support and collegiality (Barlow & Antoniou, 2006) and interactive and collaborative knowledge sharing (Boyd & Harris, 2010; Owen & Schwenger, 2009).

In regards to the use of online technology in academic induction programs, the research is sparse. Most of research on professional development and online technologies is associated with studies evaluating staff training programs in using a particular media in teaching and learning. Brack, Samarawickrema and Benson (2005), while expanding on the potentialities of such technology in professional development, caution that pedagogy must lead media. The authors advise that careful consideration should be put on program design so that the learner does not simply become a passive recipient of knowledge. Such online endeavours are a pioneering field for academic developers, and research is still embryonic and patchy. McFadzean and McKenzie (2001) report that there are difficulties associated with managing learning groups online particularly in building a collaborative community of practice. Hallas (2005) implemented an online communication and e-moderation workshop with academics on teaching and learning issues which proved to be beneficial to their professional development. Kandlbinder (2003) reports on an examination of the use of online academic development in thirty-one universities in Australia and the UK. This study found that the use of online technology in professional development was situated in a transmission model of communication and learning, mainly in an effort to save costs. Hence the need for using online media as an engaging tool aiming at higher order thinking learning activities including where knowledge is both individually and socially constructed (Handal, Groenlund, & Gerzina, in press; Weaver, Spratt, & Sid Nair, 2002). Naturally, the aim of the current study

was to appraise whether academics perspectives might have changed since such earlier research.

The Teaching Induction Program (TIP)

The Teaching Induction Program (TIP) in the Faculty of Business and Economics (FBE) of Macquarie University introduces new staff to the principles of tertiary learning and teaching and provides ongoing support on a faculty basis.

The TIP program is underpinned by a five-point philosophy that academic induction should:

1. create a culture of research-led teaching across the Faculty (Dearn, Fraser & Ryan, 2002);
2. encourage reflective and collaborative learning environments through online media (Kandlbinder, 2003);
3. stimulate exchange of teaching ideas born from both theory and personal experience (Trowler & Knight, 2000; Simpson, Cockburn-Wootten & Spiller, 2005).
4. advocate induction within a disciplinary context (Clark, Healey, Jenkins, Wareham, Chalkley, Blumhof, Gravestock, Honeybone, King & Thomas, 2002);
5. foster a student-centred approach to learning and teaching (Biggs, 2003).

In 2010 the program was granted a Vice-Chancellor Award for Programs that Enhance Learning at Macquarie University. Over 150 mostly sessional staff members at the Faculty of Business and Economics have undertaken the TIP program through twelve cohorts.

Rationale

The rationale for developing TIP grew from the need to address the academic development needs of the Faculty. An initial appraisal was carried out including a sessional staff survey, interviews with HODs and a Faculty wide professional learning survey. Informed by this organic data and combined with both qualitative and quantitative data from Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) past reports, the program was developed.

The Faculty has a large and ever growing undergraduate and postgraduate student population (14,000) resulting in large class sizes; a large number of tutorials and corresponding number of tutors and a large proportion of international students (60%). Add to this, the diverse academic workforce comprising 41% sessional staff (casual/tutors) and 20% teaching contractors, and the need for a program that can be offered more flexibly, became apparent.

Content

The main resources of the program are designed around a set of student-centred videos, themselves designed from extensive research into the experiences of our students. The program is divided into fourteen modules. The online content covers the following topics: at the first lecture or tutorial, delivering and presenting, questioning and answering, balance between theory and practice, encouraging student participation, interactive tutorials, providing feedback, working in groups, online tools and language barriers.

Each online module follows the same structure around four core learning activities:

- video viewing and critical discussion of relevant learning and teaching themes;
- discussion of practical ideas and classroom tips;
- online forum for exchanging teaching ideas;
- reflection page on each learning and teaching theme.

The ten online videos are accompanied by reflection questions designed to promote critical understanding on a variety of teaching and learning issues in tutorials and lectures. The reflection questions are thought provoking and draw upon teachers' prior knowledge and practical experience. The reflection questions are also aimed at assisting teachers to become more reflective of their own practice and to develop a broader repertoire of instructional interventions. Questions are grouped into two categories: basic and advanced. Each video is also accompanied by a set of online reading materials to provide further understanding of each module theme and to make participants familiar with current scholarly literature on teaching and learning. The questions were crafted to trigger in participants a sense of a student-centred style of teaching and learning. Examples of these questions include:

1. What is meant by saying that questions should be asked not only to assess student understanding but also to advance learning?
2. What would be the advantages or disadvantages from grouping students by achievement, friendship, self-selection, language proficiency or randomly?
3. In what important ways is group feedback more valuable than one-on-one feedback?
4. Write ten unspoken questions from new NESB students during the first days of class.
5. What are students' insights in the video about the first class?
6. Thinking back to a time where you were a student and describe the attributes of a well delivered and presented learning session.
7. How long do you wait for students to respond? Is your wait time different for high and low achievers?
8. Based on students' comment [in the video], describe what students like and dislike about the feedback they are receiving?

Structure and Delivery

The TIP program consists of an initial face-to-face session of 2 hours, covering two of the modules. This is followed by 10 to 12 weeks of online interaction where participants discuss the content of 5 further modules in synchronous and asynchronous online forums. The program concludes with a final 2-hour face-to-face session covering 2 more modules of content. The remaining 3 modules are available online and are offered as optional extras. Workshops are offered throughout the year to cater for the flexible hours of sessional staff including Saturdays. The TIP website is located at <http://bewiki.ltc.mq.edu.au/TutorTraining>. The Faculty wiki is used to deliver the online section of the program as this allows easy access for continuous improvement and ongoing updates. It also provides an easily accessible platform for participants (no logins required for viewing). Furthermore, by using this emerging read/write web technology, participants are exposed to new ways of learning and teaching and are able to consider their impact on their own teaching techniques. Thus the program acts as model of strategically aligned good practice in the use of technology.

Design of Student-Centred Videos

The work for producing the TIP student-centred online videos for academic development began in 2008. In that year, a series of interviews aimed at capturing students' expectations of quality teaching was carried out in FBE. The methodology followed a body of research on students' perceptions of good teaching, revealing that these perceptions are relevant to the design of teacher professional learning programs (Abrami, D'Apollonia & Rosenfeld, 1997; Sorensen & Cox, 2004). The interviews involved twenty-three students from three faculties of business and economics in the Sydney Metropolitan area (Handal, Wood & Muchatuta, submitted for publication). Responses revealed that students held clear perceptions of quality teaching and learning, corroborating previous research (Jahangiri & Mucciolo, 2008; Okpala & Ellis, 2005). The videos were edited, following a qualitative analysis using NVivo, to

selectively depict examples of good teaching practice using students' voices. It was envisioned that such videos would foster a student centred approach to learning and teaching due to the nature of student interviews.

TIP Continuous Improvement and Development Model

The TIP team use a number of evaluation instruments to continually improve the program.

Participants complete an individual feedback survey at the end of the first session.

This allows enhancements to be implemented to the program while the particular cohort is still active. These improvements can then be communicated to the participants, thereby modelling best practice of quality enhancement in learning and teaching. A second survey is administered at the end of the program. This invites participants to reflect on their student's learning and consider what impact the program has had on their learning experience. Along with the convenors' reflections, all of this data is recorded and reviewed and ideas are fed back into the design of the next offering following an action research cycle for professional development (McNiff, 2010). For example, feedback from participants relating to timing and length of the online interactions has led to their reorganisation, and this section now comprises asynchronous discussion forums and synchronous (live) discussion sessions offered via webinar software. Furthermore, as another result of reviewing and evaluating of the program a TIP alumni webpage has been created in the wiki, to allow the ongoing growth of a community of practice among sessional staff.

In the introductory session of the TIP, participants who are new to teaching at Macquarie University receive an explanation as to how the TIP fits into other professional learning pathways available to them. Participants are informed of the Foundations in Learning and Teaching (FILT) program offered by the Learning and Teaching Centre and then the Postgraduate in Higher Education programs.

Research Methodology

The three main research objectives were to identify how TIP's web-based modules, videos and online discussion forums, in the context of the five-point TIP philosophy, have had an effect on teachers':

1. attitudes towards digital learning technologies;
2. instructional practices and students' learning experiences; and
3. professional learning, sharing and networking .

In order to analyse the impact effect of TIP's online segments and multimedia resources on staff professional development, a series of semi-structured interviews was conducted with twelve participants who volunteered to be interviewed for the study. They composed a mix of academics, full and part-time, with differing levels of experience in teaching as well as differing discipline knowledge. The interviews aimed to characterise their attitudes towards professional learning through the online videos and discussion forums, at the conclusion of the program. Their responses were audio-taped, transcribed and subsequently coded in emerging themes through qualitative analysis.

Discussion

The three research objectives guiding the project brought to light the capacity of blended delivery as a strategy to sustain the TIP program five-point philosophy. The following findings suggest that TIP's online resources and methodology benefited staff professional development through fostering engaging and reflective teaching practices.

Research Objective 1a: Engagement with TIP Multimedia Resources

Students featured in the videos were drawn from three faculties of business and economics to purposively provide grassroots insights about their own disciplines. Such strategy is recommended by the literature as one that will contextualise professional development based on the academic needs of each discipline (Clark, Healey, Jenkins, Wareham, Chalkley, Blumhof, Gravestock, Honeybone, King & Thomas, 2002). TIP's student-centred videos appear to have made teachers more aware of issues confronting students during their university education. For example, teachers appreciated that “It was actual real-time students who were giving their feedback” and “gave me a reminder of what it was like to be on the other side.” Such realistic approach created a sense of empathy because “it really helped me understand that how I feel is also how other students feel.” Students' voices in the videos were appreciated because they “were saying things that could be [useful in teaching and learning] — things that were good, could be more of, things you could do more of or less.”

Some respondents remarked that the videos suit their learning styles. For example, a teacher said “I don't necessarily like to hear too much theory” and that the “videos made it a lot more lively for me.” Another respondent indicated that the videos “... gave real life examples rather than just a didactic version of learning. Rather than being long-winded one-way conversations, you got short real life snippets.”

Respondents also stated that the videos were rich in information because there were “students of different background, from different cultures and different subjects, and they really gave a students' honest opinion...” and because “within the video you got some contradicting [students'] views as well, which was beneficial.” Participants used various learning strategies which incorporated the videos. One of them reported thinking about the questions that accompanied the videos, for reflection. “[I did] make notes to myself then scanned the resources.” A teacher reported (when first tutoring) “watching the video the night before about what you should do in your first tutorial” while another interviewee explained how the online discussion forum was used: “rather than just watching the video, I actually reflected on the video afterwards.”

Research Objective 1b: Use of Learning Technologies to Support the Blended Mode

Online discussion forums were found useful by participants of TIP because “it was a good way of raising a discussion point and following through, people adding their input, providing evidence and suggestions from their own class”. Another respondent commented that: “it's easier there than in class and face-to-face because you have more time to think about it.” Most participants expressed positive attitudes towards the online discussion forums such as: “... I learnt a lot from the comments and the responses from fellow teachers.”

In regard to the positive effects of combined online and face-to-face interaction, a teacher said:

The blended learning is a very good idea, because when you think about the tenets of adult learning, you're mixing up the way people learn. I know personally, it was good to have the direct interaction. I don't know whether I could have done all – I'm pretty sure I couldn't have done it all.

The blended learning concept around being able to have a look at videos, having a look at a blog, contributing to that; allowed me to have a direct face-to-face content aspect, but also to sign on and learn at my own pace when I wanted to do that: which is a definite advantage.

Some teachers also commented about the improvement on their computer skills as a result of working with the wiki. Working at their own pace through the online component was also highly regarded by participants.

In general, through action research objectives 1a and 1b participants learned about the power of online multimedia in education through personal immersion with the tools (Holton, Coco, Lowe, & Dustch, 2006). They also realised through practice that online environments can productively capitalise on people's previous pedagogical experiences to bring about a community of learners operating from different geographical locations and times (Handal, Groenlund, & Gerzina, in press).

Research Objective 2: Changes in Classroom Practices

TIP participants reported visible gain improvements in students learning as a result of their involvement in TIP. "The effect was quite evident as these students tend to attend class more often and performed better in class tests after I carried out these changes", "... more students approach me at the end of the class to enquire about the study."

Changes were also reported in teachers' ability to manage questioning for learning: "My students have benefited through my increased ability to ask better questions through learning different questioning techniques. My questioning has more effectively directed the students thinking and caused them to engage with the material." And "... with the TIP program, I kind of get myself encouraged to ask students questions, instead of just me doing all the work."

TIP appears to have an impact in enabling teachers to deliver information more efficiently for example: "... slowing down my pace, repeating important information a few times so that everyone could catch it even if they did miss it the first time around and walking around the class to see if anyone has any questions." Similarly, improvement on communication skills are reported in regard to NESB (Non English Speaking Background) students: "I know that they [videos] did remind me to be very careful in terms of presentations to people whose first language isn't English." Such cultural sensitivities were also reflected in class organization like the teacher who decided to "mix them [foreign students] up with locals trying to do groups [that] are very mixed, so not only foreign or not only international students and that was working because they were happy with that."

Some responses showed a shift from rote learning oriented practices to those advocating critical thinking: "I've tried to make myself . . . just with some examples that I was giving in the tutorial to be able to ... tried to engage the students throughout the example, rather than just presenting it myself and letting them copy it down and then discuss through it after I've written it down."

Seeking feedback from students to improve teaching practices is another positive outcome. Several teachers observed: "I organised my survey and I asked them to write whatever they think about the tutor and what they want to do in the tutorials" and "[I sought] feedback about my own —how they feel about my teaching and the tutorial. I used those ideas as well, which one of them was they want to work in groups and try to do the exercises in groups."

Working in groups seems to be a major gain from the program with several teachers indicating adopting collaborative learning. One teacher said: "I would do things like sometimes I'd have them break into groups of two or three to talk about the questions, and then we would feed into a larger group." Another teacher remarked: "... the main change was

that one because I was normally practicing individually and was making them work individually but I changed that and they like it, they really like it.”

In brief, many participants felt that through the modelling of instructional practices enacted during the program implementation some of their teaching strategies had changed, evolved and became more student-centred. This confirms the learning-by-doing action research philosophy of being a problem solving tool itself while simultaneously exploring issues within the cycle of planning, implementing and reflecting (McNiff, 2010).

Research Objective 3: Professional Learning, Sharing and Networking

The collegiality that was generated among participants was another important outcome, along with professional learning. Some of those sentiments were expressed in terms such as: “Being able to speak candidly about different teaching forms and techniques” and “It is good to see that other teachers are having the same experience...”

The appreciation for having an environment where they can gain a sense of belonging to the Faculty was also expressed by the participants:

There’s no place at the university, and I made this comment when I started teaching, there’s nowhere where you can share, because you’re adjunct you get eliminated from anything, you’re not considered a real employee. Yeah, it reinforced that what I was doing was what you guys [TIP facilitators] are expecting from tutors. Also it made me feel a lot more in tune with the staff, because before when they just say, oh you’re a tutor, here’s your tutorial, it already – you don’t have any meeting, you don’t have anything. You sort of feel displaced from the general staff area, so with the TIP it felt like a tutors’ meeting or something ... and you get to know some of the tutors as well...

There were also those who were exposed to teacher training for the first time and therefore appreciative of the program: “I was teaching last year and I hadn’t done any specific training for it. I thought that was needed and I appreciated it this year.” Another participant commented on this initial formal encounter with the scholarship of teaching and learning: “... But I never realised that were studies and stuff done on all of that, so it made me a lot more aware of how to set questions”.

The above discussion shows the use of online discussion wiki forums and student-centre videos were seemed as effectively promoting a collaborative professional learning environment where participants could exchange freely their own teaching and learning insights at their own place, pace and time. As suggested by the literature (Handal, Groenlund, & Gerzina, in press) this is the unique potential of online learning environments, offering academics a place in which to discuss pedagogical issues in an informal manner as well as to reflect on scholarly commentary.

Conclusion

This case study has illustrated the benefits of a blended delivery induction program based on a pedagogical rationale of reflection, collaboration and sharing. The qualitative data suggest that online technologies have the potential to create a transforming professional learning experience. Participants’ responses in the interviews seem to indicate that TIP's student-centred videos and online discussions have had a positive qualitative effect on staff academic

development particularly in creating a critical and reflective appraisal of student learning. Participants' feedback also suggests that such a blended delivery strategy is able to enact change in teachers' instructional practices. Given that academics hold various approaches to learning and teaching (Akerlind, 2007) the provision of diversity in content delivery to address pedagogical issues appears to be well received.

The findings confirm the effectiveness of the TIP program in delivering through action research a five-point philosophy for professional development. This includes fostering a student-centred pedagogical approach in teaching and learning practice (Gibbs & Coffey, 2004; Kofod, Quinnell, Rifkin, & Whitaker, 2008). It also sought to draw participants nearer to evidence-based literature (Dearn, Fraser & Ryan, 2002) while promoting informal exchange of ideas within a collaborative environment which also fostered collegiality and networking (Trowler & Knight, 2000; Green & Ruutz, 2008). The use of online multimedia technology also empowered participants to take up these ICTs in their own instructional practice as envisioned by Kandlbinder (2003). In all these instances TIP kept a disciplinary orientation to promote contextualised professional learning as recommended by the literature (Clark et al, 2002). Encouraging academics to maintain a reflective posture towards their own pedagogical practice was always kept at the foreground of the program (Ho, Watkins, & Kelly, 2001; Fox, White, Kidd, & Ritchie, 2008).

Having various stakeholders consulted and involved through an action research framework seems to be decisive as to how the program is received. Very often training programs focus on top-down oriented training rather than reflective practice, group sharing and acknowledging participants' working knowledge. On building a community of "equals" the dialogue is opened for a candid and yet scholarly discussion of learning and teaching. The blended delivery model in this case study encouraged people to turn first inwardly towards their own instructional insights, confront them collectively and also learn from each other. In doing so, the goal was to facilitate understanding and encourage participants to be reflective, by asking themselves "How do I improve what I am doing to improve student learning?" rather than asking a trainer "What do you think I should do?"

The results in this study open avenues for deploying other learning technologies to enrich blended delivery of induction programs. More research is needed to explore the impact of instructional and logistical factors in the blended delivery of staff professional learning programs. Such research will be useful to guide the design of induction programs using mobile technologies as well as synchronous affordances such as video and chat conferencing.

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