

Strand 3: Networked Learning For Professional Development

Paper 5:

Securing the Safety Net: Towards a Coherent Strategy for Embedding Networked Learning in Academic Staff Development.

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Summary

- This paper considers the 'critical factors' involved in effective implementation of Networked Learning. These factors are examined within the institutional context of recent developments and future plans for academic professional development at the University of Glasgow.

The importance of ensuring a supportive institutional framework is discussed and some advantages of the University of Glasgow's specific culture are identified, as are some outstanding problem areas and our strategies for overcoming these. However, in times of change there will never be a perfect moment of stasis where all elements are balanced; this realisation is as important as any other.

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Introduction

- Something akin to Kierkegaard's 'leap of faith' (1844) is needed to realise the potential of networked learning. In the harsh socio-economic climate facing HE, the spotlight is now pointing further down the organisational hierarchy, towards the academic staff themselves. In addition to rising pressure for a demonstrable research record, teaching staff now must justify and redefine their academic professionalism. New ways of teaching and learning must be confronted with courage; in making the transition the scaffolding of a community of practice is crucial. We are moving from the phase where the 'Lone-Ranger', the 'Champion' of new methods of teaching and learning maintained an almost religious adherence to innovation in an adverse climate, to one where those methods are gaining credence - but practical implementation requires a supportive framework and an explicit, shared vision. At the same time, policies enabling this are only now being implemented, the effects hardly yet impacting on the traditional culture, and key players are sometimes still resistant to perceived threats. We are working towards a networked 'learning organisation', but until all elements required for that state are in place, infused and accepted throughout the community, and the reasons and expectations underlying these are 'owned' by every individual player, new problems may continue to emerge.

This paper pushes the discourse beyond acknowledged problems, to consider these as opportunities and focus on the way forward. On one level it forms a case study; a story of the University of Glasgow's efforts to rise above negative constraints, and move strategically into a position of strength. In this respect local analysis may serve to highlight potential problem areas and assist others with similar aims. On another level, the paper attempts to draw general conclusions about the management of change and networked learning, by drawing these themes together in the context of staff development.

Networked Learning for Staff Development

- The Teaching & Learning Service supports staff development at the University of Glasgow through tailored work with departments and a programme of workshops across the spectrum of Teaching and Learning, including innovative teaching and research. The TLS has also provided a programme for new lecturers in collaboration with the Universities of Strathclyde and Paisley.

Like many HEIs, the University of Glasgow recently turned its attention to the need for more continuous staff development, foreseeing the call for Accreditation of University teachers. A proposal was passed by the Board of Studies in February 1998, to begin development immediately on the first stage of a structured programme of professional academic development. In its first year, the Certificate and New Lecturer Programme will be available through a pedagogically principled mix of work-based, face-to-face and networked learning, with a distance option available in year two.

Our aim is to nurture critical judgement in the reflective practitioner, through skills development, practice-based inquiry, theoretical framing and guidance in the marshalling of evidence. The programme will draw, where appropriate, on the use of mentors, collaboration and peer assessment, as well as more traditional methods. Efficient ways of communicating on a variety of tasks and levels will therefore be essential, for both on and off-campus learners.

However, introducing methods such as collaborative learning requires courage, both on the part of the tutor and the learner (Panitz, 1996; Topping, 1996). Given that it takes time to prepare, build and support a learning community, and that staff have often noted an initial downward curve in student-evaluations of their courses when collaborative methods are introduced, this is not really surprising.

The need for staff development is clear, both in the use of technology and, more importantly, in understanding how learning can be facilitated through the opportunities technology affords. By applying

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these methods in the programme, participants will learn through personal experience, in the protected environment which networked learning can provide.

These aims are therefore eminently suited to the use of networked learning technologies, and flexible delivery. However, the integration of such a programme in the institutional context requires great care.

Context

- The University of Glasgow has a good technical infrastructure and a consistent history of involvement in relatively high-profile projects dealing with technology in HE. Undoubtedly the culture has shifted to a more generally aware and widespread interest in harnessing IT to teaching and learning over recent years, as findings from comparative studies in 1993 and 1996 confirmed (Doughty et al., 1996).

Technology: The TILT Project

Perhaps the biggest single influence on awareness was the University's 3 year institutional TLTP project Teaching & Learning with Technology (TILT). TILT employed thirteen contract staff, supporting the 26 permanent staff who proposed the project, and worked with 33 participating colleagues in 20 departments.

The involvement of distributed departments as centres of research, the sheer scale of the project and the reflective methods of action research helped to raise awareness and gain credence for useful applications of technology.

Networked Learning

With the University-wide campus-information system moving to the Web, the advent of the UMI projects (Use of the MANs; SHEFC Regional Strategic Initiative Funding projects to stimulate effective use of the Metropolitan Area Networks), the growing familiarity of academic staff with the ClydeNet MAN, (the network is owned by a con-

sortium of the participating Higher Education Institutions and operated by the University of Glasgow Computing Service), and well-publicised attention to infrastructure developments on campus, teaching staff are focusing increasingly on the obvious medium for their course materials - over the networks.

However, we had been aware for some time of the confusion amongst academic staff over where to go for help and advice. The various sources seemed to proliferate in the post-TILT years, and with the University of Glasgow becoming a TLTSN site, we were pointing people to not only TILT work and TLTSN internally, but also to a large number of both applications and infrastructure development projects, CTI centres, TLTP consortium projects, evaluation centres and an increasing number of faculty or project development officers, let alone the distributed services providing training.

Externally, collaboration between institutions in the West of Scotland (and more widely in the region) is particularly facilitated by close physical proximity and fast virtual links through the inter-connected Scottish MANs. We work closely with and benefit from a number of support projects in networked learning, including LTDI and TALISMAN. Staff development activities in the region are open to delegates from all local institutions, and well-attended.

As interest in networked provision grew, many 'bottom-up' developments found an immediate focus for collaborative courses and resources in the Clyde Virtual University (CVU), hosted at Strathclyde on the ClydeNet MAN, which was receiving considerable attention far beyond the reaches of the high-speed network area it served.

However, in retrospect perhaps we suffered for the timely 'solution' of CVU, which could not address all the needs of an embedded infrastructure for networked learning at Glasgow. There was clearly a need for rationalisation of training and resources, the development of longer-term, sustainable policies and attention to more flexible provision before the University could begin to embed networked learning. Following the TILT recommendations, some moves towards this were effected.

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Strategies

- In The TILT Legacy we strongly urged a coordinated mixture of bottom-up and top-down approaches to satisfy the need for an IT service which responds to the demands of educational issues and of users. We recommended that:
 - a University service provide focus and support for Technology In Learning & Teaching;
 - the University promotes a culture of giving and taking help in improving teaching (Doughty, 1996).

In January 1997 the TLS assumed the responsibility for University-level promotion of technology-assisted teaching and learning, based on experience gained in the TILT project. Two new posts were created within the service, to provide a central source of support concerned with the use of technology in teaching and learning for staff. Our role involves assisting departments to develop teaching and learning, making the best use of different media and methods.

Shortly after the restructuring of TLS, the Glasgow University Initiative in Distance Education (GUIDE) was formally established, following from recommendations made by the Advisory Group of a previous investigatory project into distance education. GUIDE is a small team, and in common with the rest of TLS, struggles to meet demand. It quickly became clear that we could ease some of the pressure on our limited resources and reach a wider audience by putting some of our materials, activities and resources on-line. We were also aware that the TLS might, in this way, better put our preaching into practice in terms of efficient and appropriate use of IT.

GUIDE, too, planned to make existing print-based materials on the use of network technology available on the web, as part of a new collection of materials for staff on distance education under development.

It was therefore timely and appropriate to combine the requirements analyses and design a coherent programme of networked professional development

which for the first time, would be suited to the needs of both flexible delivery on campus and distance learners, from registration procedures to support mechanisms.

Institutional Strategies

In tandem with these operational level changes, senior management were responding with strategies to confront the challenges of the 21st century. Following a systematic analysis, The Strategic Planning Statement submitted to SHEFC highlights:

- a tradition of activity in adult and continuing education with a commitment to wider access;
- support for the high quality of teaching through a lecturer development programme and general developmental work in teaching and learning;
- an established commitment to experiment with and exploit new technologies;
- a strong networking infrastructure;
- a need for more co-ordination of support services;
- active and growing collaboration with other institutions;
- an emphasis on support and training for all levels and categories of staff.

The vision and direction of the institution have been redefined, and attention has been focused on our strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, which have been made explicit. Strategies have been developed and, in addition to existing Information and Staffing Strategies, a new Teaching and Learning Strategy is evolving. This emphasises encouragement of good practice, including in innovation, in a continuous improvement in teaching and learning. The strategy recognises that, to effect this improvement, it will be necessary to improve the situation of the 'well supported academic' with reformulated academic and administrative services.

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It appears that we have an auspicious set of circumstances, then, in which to embed networked learning. As can be evidenced by these over-arching strategies, we have the sympathies of the decision-makers and, to some extent, practical support in terms of changes in funding and administrative procedures. The establishment of TLS as a 'one-stop shop' for continuing professional development in teaching and learning which embeds, rather than isolates, technological training, complements the establishment of GUIDE. In sharing the educational philosophies of the TLS (and some staff), GUIDE articulates with and extends that service to distance learning.

Practical Strategies

Bates (1995) suggests three practical strategies for developing staff skills in using technology; understanding how learning takes place; and translating this understanding to the design of teaching processes based on that knowledge. We have already achieved the first two of these; regular workshops on teaching practice and the use of technology, and 'rewards' or motivational factors for successful, innovative teaching. (These, though still limited, have proved crucial to a number of innovatory approaches in networked learning.)

The third, the provision of a comprehensive development programme for teachers in HE, we worked towards over the first year with TLS, in collaborating with other services providing training and support activities, and with Strathclyde and Paisley in a review of the collaborative course for probationary teachers from all 3 institutions (to be subsumed into our new programmes after September).

The review and evaluation findings suggested that, though worthwhile, this drawing together of pre-existing strands into a more rational provision, still based essentially on old models, was insufficient.

'These are minimum requirements. An even more radical step would be to require successful completion of a higher education teaching qualification for tenure appointments; unfortunately such courses, if they exist at all, are not avail-

able in a manner that makes it practical for most faculties, i.e. part-time and at a distance.'

(Bates, 1995)

With GUIDE encouraging policies to enable pedagogically sound and well devised distance courses, our plans for a coherent, networked professional development programme appear well grounded.

Change Theories and Critical Factors

- There has, inevitably, been a recent increase in literature applying theories of change to the current situation of HEIs. Ford et al. (1996) provide perhaps the first and most systematic analysis of the HEI as complex organisational system for learning. They claim that in order to take full advantage of new technology in adapting for the future, a process of redefinition needs to take place. This needs to start at the level of a clear vision for the institution in the 21st century, and be followed through a mission statement, strategies and policies. Only once the direction of the whole has been made explicit can the mechanisms and components be clearly defined and implemented.

The University of Glasgow is comparatively well prepared at the level of institutional direction and supporting policies.

However, Scott and Robinson (1996) distinguish three stages necessary for integration; technological change, changes to pedagogy and changes in people factors. Higher Education is just beginning to adapt teaching practice and has hardly yet addressed the 'people' element. It is only when perceptions of change allow the individual to function smoothly within that process that there is any chance of success. In common with the TILT project (Doughty et. al, 1995), the authors identify the power of change agents with a sense of ownership as an important factor in changing perceptions.

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There is no shortage of change agents available at the University, nevertheless, the 'people factors' appear to be the most problematic. At times it can be difficult to comprehend reasons for resistance, when the overall organisational direction has been examined and made explicit.

Ford et al.(1996) highlight the need to consider all components in the 'Learning Environment Architecture' from different perspectives and for various qualities. Florini and Vertrees (1989) have a similar suggestion. They cite three "inextricably mixed critical contextual variables": institutional politics, costs and the need for new alliances. Although computer conferencing might be only one element in networked learning, these variables are equally relevant to a broader definition. The authors recognise that, even where strategic direction has been made explicit, interpretations may differ at the operational level. Unless there is a perception of shared strategic direction at practical levels, energies may pull in different directions.

Our experience of such issues is outlined in the following section.

Issues

- In the process of change towards embedding networked learning in continuing academic staff development, we must then be aware, and in control of, a complex array of issues ranging from a beneficial and coherent institutional vision, through to adequate equipment and training mechanisms, attitudes and expectations of staff and the prevailing educational philosophy. We must attempt to relate this aim to the various missions and directions of the individuals involved at every level, and from a number of perspectives. We must provide motivation and rewards and ensure that systems and policies are in place to support and encourage change. We must have the support of the key decision makers who will formulate these policies and procedures. In addition, we must be aware that change takes time to filter through the hierarchy, and in periods of transition old and new values will coexist, often unhappily.

Despite an unusually rich shared culture, a supportive and responsive senior management, an advanced infrastructure and generally good lines of communication across hierarchies and service boundaries, those of us aspiring to provide a quality networked learning environment at Glasgow have experienced some difficulties. In the planning of a new distance course the operational infrastructure is often afforded less attention than the design of materials, yet it is a critical factor. James (undated), helpfully provides models in which the various tasks involved in distance education can be matched to a unit or level of the institution - however, many of these tasks are new to a traditional university and securing agreement to undertake essential tasks at this level of institutional responsibility is not often straightforward.

As part of the task of designing a networked learning environment for this and future programmes, renewed effort has been applied in researching details of the existing infrastructure and plans for development. Some of the information required for this process has been astonishingly hard to obtain. Despite our efforts to be included on, or informed of, the progress of working groups and standards committees, communication between stakeholders is frustratingly erratic.

Before solutions can be found it is necessary to identify the nature and cause of the barriers at work. We do have a 'sharing', open culture gained through a history of collaboration. Explanations centre on lack of time, the lack of clear messages to give us has certainly featured, but the cause frequently seems to be the varying viewpoints through which our vision is prioritised. (Florini and Vertrees, 1989)

It is difficult to progress beyond the impasse created when one unit, already under pressure on limited resources, is unable to 'own' the urgency of another, which is dependent on their support for optimum success.

Looking Ahead

- Progress has been made, through applying many of the change management strategies discussed above (appealing to senior management, relating our aims

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to the strategic direction at appropriate levels, encouraging ownership, enhancing our credibility, seeking champions in high places, and refining the clarity of our aims in relation to visions) and where difficulties remain attention has been given to solutions within these constraints. Our strategies continue to evolve and, at the time of writing, one promising approach may raise the profile of our project to a sufficient degree to secure more rapid solutions.

'Implementation of a new medium or method cannot be expected to work perfectly ... We need to learn the lessons of each implementation, and then use those lessons learned. In this way we slowly build a body of knowledge of how best to use educational media, and a teaching profession that knows what it is doing and why ... we must also be enabled to act differently. That depends on the institutional context in which we operate being constructed so that it affords and encourages the actions prompted by analysis.'

(Laurillard, 1993)

We have a strong network infrastructure and an increasing interest in employing this. Networked Learning is appropriate to our audience, methods, and teaching and learning aims, providing a focus for a 'community of learners' reflecting on their practice. Furthermore, Networked Learning offers a means by which we can involve remote learners in this social process. Recent research has noted that the flexibility to balance theory, practice and reflection as the day affords is a positive indicator in some participants' decision to opt for distance learning, and that this autonomy can encourage self-motivation and critical thinking. (Hedge, 1996; Chivers et al., 1997).

In changing times, we cannot expect all elements to be perfectly attuned. We can, however, aim for the optimum point where sufficient critical factors have been addressed. At this University we are fortunate in many top-level policies which, because still in transition, give us critical 'room to move'. It is exciting to design a supportive networked envi-

ronment for learning, with backing and resources to design holistically, top-down and bottom-up, where belief in our goals is spreading with our credibility.

Hopefully, we are designing an environment in which a new generation of teachers will leap and thrive in a culture that, though currently in transition, will move more smoothly towards change by virtue of their expectations.

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