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IN AT THE DEEP END – SWAPPING ROLES THROUGH STAFF DEVELOPMENT ONLINE

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Abstract

After reviewing questions about how Australian Universities carry out staff development for online teaching and learning, this paper reports on an initiative that has brought together the outcomes of previous research into an online resource and workshop. Having piloted these, the full version of the workshop was recently completed by a group of staff at Southern Cross University. The authors reflect upon experiences of swapping roles – teachers becoming learners, and educational designer (usually a student advocate in the design process) becoming the teacher. Reflections on experiences are reported from reflective journal and evaluation data.

Keywords

Roles of teacher, roles of learner, staff development online, reflection on practice

Background

The genesis of the workshop described in this paper goes back to 1998 when a survey of staff development responses to the demand for online teaching and learning was conducted (Ellis, O'Reilly, & Debreceny, 1998). In surveying all Australian Universities using Academic Staff Development Units (ASDU's) as a starting point, it was found that much of the staff development focusing on online teaching and learning at that time was conducted in traditional ways. Seminars and workshops were the favoured formats for introducing staff to the online environment and its implications for pedagogy. It was rare to find online itself as a learning environment for staff development, though respondents often reported a considerable level of unmet training needs.

Further research conducted by two members of the original project team looked at the role of University Web pages in staff development, and how they might support teaching and learning online (O'Reilly, Ellis, & Newton, 2000). All Australian Universities' Web sites were reviewed to locate an identifiable ASDU, Teaching and Learning Centre (TLC) or similar. Thirty two appropriate Web sites were identified as open to public access and these were reviewed. Six were found to include exemplary features. One outcome of this research was the revision of Southern Cross University's own Teaching and Learning Web site (Newton, O'Reilly, & Ellis, 2000). Two main principles determined this redesign – to maximise what was available by public access to foster diffusion of expertise, and to conform to a framework derived from Brew (1995).

We aimed to create a site that supported or facilitated the following functions suggested by Brew (1995) as culminating in an exemplary suite of approaches to staff development:

- Action research
- Courses (including workshops and seminars)

- Self-directed professional development packages
- Training approaches across all categories of staff
- Working across the institutional hierarchy
- Getting and using evaluation information
- Institutional framework – relating staff development to university's goals
- Scholarship in teaching and learning.

At the same time as the Web site redevelopment was occurring, SCU also adopted an online Learning Management System (LMS) called Blackboard CourseInfo (v4.1) as an institutional initiative. The deployment of this system has become known as MySCU and it soon became evident that to make best use of the opportunities the online environment offered, teaching staff needed the skills in effective facilitation of interaction and text-based discussion.

In 2000/2001, TLC funded the design of an initiative that immersed staff in the experience and issues in online interaction. The initial prototype was reported at the AusWeb01 conference (O'Reilly & Brown, 2001). Feedback from professional peers at that conference led to the final design and decisions on how to implement the online workshop for staff development at SCU.

Design of interActive Learning Online

interActive Learning Online (iLO) is a collection of readings, models, frameworks, commentaries and lists of references, designed as a Web-site to be accessed for self-study or as part of a group-based facilitated workshop. It is organised around four themes whereby all elements of Becher's (1996) model of staff development can be addressed i.e. personal experience, consultation and interaction with those of greater expertise, networking across disciplines and campuses, research through reflection, leadership, mentoring and collegial exchange. A commitment of approximately 25 hours to the workshop is suggested or about 5–6 hours per week over a four week period.

Interactive elements are located within the MySCU password-protected area. This is intended to help participants become more familiar with the environment which is supported by the University and through which many are now required to teach. iLO is designed to ensure staff can experience knowing at a "visceral level what it means to be learning in a technology-mediated environment" (O'Reilly & Brown, 2001 p. 260). Briefly, the organising themes for the workshop structure are:

Teaching environment
Topics in this section include characteristics of the online environment and its implications for teaching and learning. Notions of hypertext, reading, learning and navigating through web spaces are explored using links to theoretical papers and provocative works by contemporary authors.

Disciplinary philosophy and practice
Readings aim at stimulating questions of how core philosophies can inform one's approach and how this can be translated to online. Questions posed in this context prompt consideration of how one's disciplinary cultures intersect with the potentials of interaction online.

Communication and community
Includes explorations of online learning communities, potentials of text-based discussions and comparisons with other methods of communication in education. A range of practitioners' approaches to online facilitation help to focus participants on what is useful to their own teaching.

Assessment and evaluation
Explores new forms of assessment available online and how we can evaluate the effectiveness of the online and interactive components of our programs.

Piloting 'interActive Learning Online' and swapping roles

Two pilot workshops were run, the first occurred in December 2001, the second in March 2002. A full workshop in July 2002 led to the reflections in this paper on throwing ourselves into the deep end – staff into the role of students and educational designer into the role of teaching staff.

Pilot workshop #1

The first pilot was run as a two and a half hour, face-to-face pre-conference workshop at the 2001 ASCILITE conference. It was held in a laboratory, each participant at a computer. The program mirrored a full-length workshop and was structured around the four themes of the Web resource.

Eighteen participants registered for the workshop and were asked to introduce themselves in the password protected online discussion forum before meeting at the conference. Fourteen participants were from higher education institutions across Australia and New Zealand, and four were from private educational providers in Australia and Canada. All were encouraged to take some time to become acquainted with resources and topics in advance of the workshop.

Introductions, facilitation of explorations of hypertext, assessment, and a role play occurred both verbally as well as all participants posting their responses directly to the online forums.

A toe in the water

Overall this first pilot served to test the workshop's structure and process. Attention to the theme of assessment and evaluation suffered from time limitations which was a serious problem overall. Participants reported that the most engaging activity was the role play. Once participants familiarised themselves with their own role and the question to be answered, this activity exploded into a huge number of postings and interactions. Several evaluation comments also referred to the handouts provided, for example:

- you've provided the best resources in your booklet…I've been to many
- workshops most people just print off their slides; you guys took that extra mile. Well done.

Pilot workshop #2

A second pilot took place in Weeks 3–7 of semester in March, 2002. An invitation was posted by SCU staff email announcing the program, the anticipated time commitment, and that the workshop was to be conducted asynchronously online. Registration was invited from all interested staff both academic and non-academic. An external consultant and a TLC staff member co-facilitated this pilot workshop, spending two weeks each in the facilitation role. Eighteen staff registered for the workshop, 12 from Lismore, 6 from the Coffs Harbour campus. Of these, all but three were academic teaching staff. Their disciplinary areas are shown in Table 1:

Discipline areas	*Number of participants*
Arts and Social Sciences	6
Business	2
Health and Applied Sciences	4
Information Technology	3
Student support services	3
TOTAL	18

Table 1: Disciplinary areas of participants in workshop March, 2002

The group's previous experience of facilitating online discussion was generally very low. One staff member had two semesters' experience, another had successfully facilitated an online discussion the previous semester, and three had trialled the feature but reported difficulties in engaging students in discussions. Most people introduced themselves as beginners to online facilitation and their expectation was that they would gain a better understanding, and some more in-depth experience of the discussion features and issues inherent in online facilitation.

The facilitators themselves were “advanced beginners”. The consultant had significant classroom, online teaching and some staff development experience. The TLC staff member had experience in online facilitation, extensive background in staff development, design and development of teaching events. Co-facilitation was familiar to both and they looked forward to the online activity.

Getting our feet wet

In the month-long workshop, each week focused on one theme. With the diversity of participants, this workshop promised some interesting debates, but that was not to be the case. Early on, participants found that the structure was not addressing their need for experiential learning. The thematic topics that were to direct the reading and activities required participants to put aside the practicalities upper-most on their minds and consider issues at a more conceptual level. While experience of online interaction had been promised, the first two weeks dwelt on investigating approaches to teaching, hypertext, non-linear navigation and construction of knowledge. These matters seemed far removed from their immediate queries on managing students’ responses online.

In Week 3 of the workshop a role-play activity was to occur, but it was Week 5 of semester and some staff had marking commitments. Attention to the workshop became fragmented and momentum for participation lost. During the workshop and subsequent debriefing, objections were expressed to having data collected from the pilot for research and out of respect for this position, no detailed results are reported here. Notably, the reason for this objection was a sense of being a “guinea pig”, the very thing we were hoping to address through this staff development activity.

The full workshop

A further workshop was planned, taking into account the feedback and our experiences from both pilots. A key comment from pilot #2, referred to the difficulty of finding time for involvement. The workshop was thus scheduled between semesters when most staff have a break from teaching and marking. Another lesson carried forward was to provide readings as booklets in advance, and to focus the online time more on ‘interActivities’. Lastly, it was decided that just one staff member (the principal author) would support all workshop activities, modelling a social constructivist approach as a way of empowering participants to identify their needs and prioritise their focus.

Thirteen staff registered: nine from Lismore, two from Coffs Harbour, one from Sydney, and one casual academic contracted to develop a subject for flexible delivery and become more familiar with the MySCU capabilities. Three were support staff (one from the international office, one from the library and one from the online support team). Disciplinary areas are shown in Table 2:

Discipline areas	*Number of participants*
Arts and Social Sciences	4
Business	4
Health and Applied Sciences	2
Student support services	3
TOTAL	13

Table 2: Disciplinary areas of participants in workshop July, 2002

The collective prior experiences of this group was notable, one member having been the principal staff trainer for the MySCU environment over six years, and a learner in another University’s online environment. Three members of the staff had previously made consistent use of the online environment in teaching and another had experience teaching and learning online elsewhere. A further five staff members had experience in either designing for online (to enhance either face to face or off-campus teaching), facilitating discussion of a creative/research nature or supervising the use of collaborative hypertext in classroom activities. The remaining three staff had limited prior experience online and occupied roles which now required some familiarity with the online environment in order to perform their developmental or support functions.

The most commonly stated reasons for registering for the workshop included to:

- become better informed, to see what works and what doesn't
- examine their own values within the online context
- improve their decision making on what to teach online, and how to communicate effectively
- experience online discussions and online activities from a learner's perspective
- assess how to be more proactive in addressing learner's needs.

In at the deep end

As mentioned earlier, resource materials were located on a Web site and interactivity was designed to occur in the MySCU environment. MySCU is structured to include a Notice Board, Content areas (which in this case were simply gateways to the workshop resource site), Communication areas (Discussion Forums and the email orginator page), Group areas (designated areas for groups to work privately) and the External Links area (for supplementary Web pages). Statistics from the MySCU system show the number of accesses to each area. However, these statistics can only be indicative and cannot represent an accurate count of which pages were visited within each area, or indeed how many times a person logged in, just that they accessed the reported areas.

From the outset participants enthusiastically interacted, to the extent that by the middle of the first week, those who were late in posting their introduction expressed a feeling of being left behind. For a comprehensive consideration of the experiences of the iLO workshop, we would need to view all aspects of interaction, which according to Henri (1992) are participation, extent of interaction, and the social, cognitive and metacognitive nature of interaction. As space does not allow for an extensive analysis here, we refer instead to Mason's (1992) ideas of analysing the content of extracts from discussion forums, reflective journals and evaluation feedback. As the primary reason given for undertaking the workshop was to gain insight into a students' perspective, participants' reflections on this swapping of roles and the facilitator's reflections of sustained involvement with staff are reported as key experiences in staff development terms.

Reflections of educational designer as teacher

The facilitator initiated and encouraged participation in several ways – broadcast announcements, occasional email alerts for the start of a new activity, an ongoing forum for introductions and issues arising, a number of discussion forums on readings, two 90 minute chat sessions, two small group activities and a personal reflective journal (private to self and facilitator).

During the third week, the facilitator was off campus and continued to check into discussion areas, posting notices each day. By the fourth week, activity was significantly diminished and the topic of "assessing online discussion" was again not taken up as had been planned.

The following discussion is based on extracts from the Notice Board (facilitator's reflections), Communication and Group areas, including participants' reflective journals. Evaluation comments are reported and discussed. The frustrations of what can happen to good pedagogical ideas as a result of the technical domain became a reality for the (educational designer) facilitator.

Forums and Communication areas

Separate discussion forums were established for each reading and discussion topic. Some of these were prepared in advance and some were created as a result of emerging discussions. Participants also chose to use the forum for introductions throughout the workshop as the general forum for self-initiated discussion. By the middle of the second week the facilitator's role became one of enabling the multiple discussion activities to be self-sustaining and to maintain a responsiveness to the group as a whole. This is well illustrated by a comment posted to the Notice Board:

> …trying to find the right moment when I can archive the introductions forum…but every time I look there's more comments there…very interesting [Fac].

Small group activities and role plays

A group activity was established in the first week, based on Benson, Guy, & Tallman (2001) who considered learner's perspectives and the transformation of these perspectives during the learning process. Benson et al.(2001) described learning styles as one of the three perspectives which learners bring to the online course This was also one of the issues raised early in the workshop:

> Within any group, individual differences in learning style and communication are always an ongoing consideration. Consequently I can see a place for learning within this environment [P2].
>
> …our students are mature aged and find computers/online communities threatening so am interested in … selling them a different way of receiving information [P7].

Three small groups were formed to consider questions of learning styles from a more personal perspective. The activity was modelled on an email game by Thiagarajan and Jasinski (2001), where questions are passed from group to group and participants turn from one question to the next. In this case, over a period of six days, each participant was first a member of one group, then two, and finally all participants could view all three questions. In the interests of transparency, as a staff development activity, it was thought that individuals could be critical participants in the process, but those who looked into other group areas expressed a sense of intruding into a private discussion. This as well as the fast pace of the activity may have inhibited further comment.

The second small group activity took place in Weeks 2 and 3, when each group member was allocated a role from the suggestions by Bonk (2000) e.g. Initiator/reporter, Planner/evaluater, Devil's advocate/critic/censor, Questioner/idealist/open-minded, Warrior/debater/bloodletter, Watchdog/peacemaker/synthesiser, and Explorer/adventurer. From their given role position, group members considered two provocative questions, but while some participants were able to launch straight into an adopted perspective they were not happy to sustain their positions in the face of opposing views, stepping out of role immediately:

> First law of arguing against your own beliefs -- feels really uncomfortable -- but wish I could have explored it with more engagement [P11].

The role play activity was chosen for a number of reasons:

- Role plays are often considered in unit design as an online activity which extends learning by experiencing perspective transformation while having some fun.
- By delegating roles to participants and including the roles of initiator, planner and synthesiser, it was hoped that the facilitator's absence off campus for one week would be offset by the proactive contributions of participants from within their role.

The two questions posed were again taken from issues emerging in the previous week's group discussion areas – how appropriate is anonymity online and how a collaborative culture is established among students who only meet each other online.

Benefits of remote facilitation were appreciated by participants who were able to continue with the role plays and discussion topics, as well as browsing the online papers 'hot off the press' from the conference attended by the facilitator. Although the facilitator did not play a role, instead she was able to address Becher's notion of providing access to experts by linking workshop participants to conference papers which were about role plays and simulations (e.g. Ip, Linser, & Jasinski, 2002).

Synchronous Chat

With so many discussions having started by the second week, and the forum for introductory postings being used daily, a synchronous chat session was planned to review progress and collect our focus. A time for the session was agreed by online vote and scheduled to suit the majority.

Eight of the thirteen participants found their way into the Virtual Classroom. One participant did not find the way to the chat area and another two had technical problems. Two were unavailable to join. Technical

problems prevented the facilitator from effectively participating, but having posted the agenda in advance by email, another participant was able to agree to take the facilitation role.

Meanwhile others were effectively orchestrating activities in the Virtual Classroom, experimenting with graphic tools and the virtual whiteboard. They applied principles from the week's readings by placing themselves on a continuum from constructivist to objectivist teaching approaches. This was an interesting exercise, and one clearly not to be taken too seriously as the prior discussions of these concepts had several folks shying away from labeling themselves as a 'this-ist' or a 'that-ist'. The participants' successes when playing with the Virtual Classroom, its tools and functionalities resulted in several of them wanting to trial its use in their teaching as a replacement for teletutes.

The facilitator's lack of control in this synchronous activity provided an interesting perspective on the social-constructivist paradigm that was underpinning the facilitator's whole approach. It was encouraging to see participants confidently trying a technical feature for the first time, experimenting with its capabilities and applying it to their own needs. The following comments indicate willingness of participants to learn by doing, and to reflect on this at the same time:

> Yes, I had Meg on the phone – she keeps getting bumped off. That is why she wanted us to work through the agenda items – who is next? [P11]
>
> …we are quite happy to chat and discuss in the absence of Meg, but perhaps with some students they might feel a little at sea in the absence of the instructor… hence the need for an agenda… I notice there's a 'request for floor' option that is not enabled here… might be a useful option [P1].

Reflective journals

During the second week each participant was issued with a personal space within which to make notes and reflections of their experiences and insights. Access to each journal was restricted to the named participant and the facilitator. It was in the latter part of the third week that she wrote:

I am impressed to see that those of you who have begun using the journal are noting your own ponderings and reflections, your own queries and memory joggers for later. It looks like a great resource for your own benefit and putting my comments there does not feel quite right… [Fac]

The facilitator's journal was kept using Notice Board and personal notes. A reflective piece posted during the second asynchronous chat, was lost due to unresolved incompatibilities between the facilitator's computer and the Virtual Classroom software. The technology was evidently both supporting the group and creating new circumstances for applying creative teaching strategies.

Reflections of teachers as learners

Reflections of academic staff in their role as learners could be found in the workshop archives. The forum where participants first introduced themselves and continued with self-directed discussions revealed the nature of their interests and collegial exchanges. Other forums, more specifically, the reflective journals trialled by some, provided valuable comments. Evaluation feedback and personal emails also offered ideas for future workshops. In the following discussion this data is referred to with the prior consent and subsequent member checking of participants.

Participant journals

Six participants experimented with a personal online journal, and all but one acknowledged the possibilities it offered for critical self-reflection by students. Another commented that though they had previously used a journal as an assessment task, they planned to review their expectations of students after experiencing the effects of journalling in the workshop context. Three of the staff who tried the reflective online journal, explicitly appreciated its effectiveness for noting thoughts within an unstructured and unmoderated area. Their enthusiasm translated to plans for inclusion of such a reflective learning task in their teaching. One person reflected:

> … real merit in working alone for some of the way… consolidation of thoughts and real interaction with the notions, instead of discussion just for its own sake [P2].

Evaluation feedback

Seven participants returned feedback at the conclusion of the workshop (54% response rate). The most enjoyable aspects reported were the opportunity to experience the workshop from a student perspective, to communicate, share ideas and learn from more experienced colleagues. Most useful lessons gained were a better understanding of the importance of site design, and the role and commitment of the facilitator. The Web site design was considered overwhelming with its volume of resources and the usefulness of hard copy readings was reiterated. Discussion archives were valued both for catching up on what was missed, and as higher order activities for students. Activities considered of most benefit were general discussions, role play, synchronous chat (by those who successfully took part) and the simple elements of email and discussion boards. Personal reflective journals were singled out as having useful possibilities, though not everyone attempted them. Some participants who tried the journal felt a little out of their comfort zone, not being able to make jottings as soon as they came to mind, but having to be online to do so. By far the most challenging aspect of the workshop to the participants was the pressure of time and feeling snowballed by multiple demands within and outside the workshop. Three participants commented that every aspect of the workshop offered benefits, even things that didn't work well.

With regards to the workshop structure, some suggested "a little more guidance" while others felt "comfortable with the 'looser' structure". Similarly, facilitation style was on the one hand praised:

> Liked the hands-off approach so that you (Meg) only entered to summarise key points or draw out common points and provided some gentle encouragement [P10]

…and on the other, equivocated:

> I got the sense that it was a "hands-off" approach wrt (sic) the directions we took, whereas I think at times it could have benefited from clear directives… [P3]

Participants' plans to apply what was gained from the workshop included:

- I will be more sensitive to students' problems and I have gained ideas of role playing etc
- I want to follow up on concept maps, usability of chat rooms instead of tele-tutorials
- Contact the [disciplinary] librarian to negotiate involvement in my subject
- Explore the idea … for students to present a synthesis of … [discussion forums] as part of the assessment so that analysis becomes a feature of the exercise rather than merely contribution.

Most suggestions for future workshops were based around the issue of time… is there any good time for such an exercise? Suggestions included – holding the workshop over a longer period (December-January); for a shorter period of 3-4 days more regularly, say every few months.

Swapping roles and mopping up

From this review of the iLO workshop it appeared that staff gained a great deal of benefit from taking a student perspective in their online learning. Several took this to its ultimate sense and chose to complete the online activities by dialling in from home or during their travels, to experience for themselves how this translated into satisfaction and/or frustration in a learning context. They appreciated the time needed to engage with fellow participants in meaningful dialogue online, and complete prescribed readings in preparation for focused discussion. The topic of assessment was again noted as being of such scope and importance that it deserves its own workshop in future rather than being crowded in with a rich collection of other discussion topics.

The question of when is it best to hold such a staff development event remains debatable. Holding it between semesters meant that although staff were not engaged in teaching, they were not necessarily staying at their computers, either travelling to holiday locations, conferences or similar activities. Their

sympathies for busy mature aged learners who often juggle family, work and study, were repeatedly reinforced. Remote facilitation was appreciated from both sides.

Participants came from a number of disciplines which revealed what it is like to discuss issues of common concern with peers who are both unfamiliar in a social sense and who are bringing their own disciplinary paradigm to the discussion. Online, where taken-for-granted assumptions can be highly contentious within such a diverse group, workshop participants were able to explain their confusion, ask for their needs to be addressed or offer their assistance to others. Though these skills are not always evident in our undergraduate groups, they can be developed and are found among students with both online and offline experience of critical reflection. Self-awareness of participants' experiences clearly became the touchstone for their future teaching plans.

Learning by doing, learning from mistakes and from the stories of peers, were three ways that participants reported learning from the workshop. These elements are not only important for student learning (Jona, 2000), but were also significant for the facilitator. Immersion in the role enabled the facilitator to engage with issues such as what to do when the technology fails, how to provide structure while allowing spontaneity and personal exchange, how to encourage quiet members and also attend to the more exuberant. Much of the personally significant learning for the facilitator occurred through the sustained contact, reflection and shared observation of participants as they posed and solved problems amongst themselves, shared stories and requested clarification.

Finally, it seemed that knowing all participants before hand meant that the facilitator had some insight into how to interpret textual comments and their implied tone of voice. Stories shared through the workshop by participants often expressed their own intrinsic goals and these lessons were best drawn out within a context based on personal understanding. Laying some of the foundations and seeding discussions with topics that would resonate with the group was also very valuable. Unlike teaching classes of unfamiliar students, divining the potential of individuals within a small group seemed to be a realistic goal in this online staff development workshop.

Conclusions for now and plans to go in for another dip

This paper has reported on two pilot events and an online staff development workshop where swapping roles of learner-teacher was a highlight for all involved. With each immersion in online workshops, staff developers gain expertise that can flow on to the teaching and learning process.
Future workshops will build on the success of this one with its affable atmosphere and freedom to explore, challenge and question without fear of judgement. A fuller content analysis of comments will be completed and integrated into the planning of another workshop to be held next year. Solutions will be sought to problems like what happens when comments are left hanging, achieving a balance between guiding and supporting the development of shared understanding, minimising dialogue just for its own sake, and the correction of any ongoing technical problems.

While the extensive website resources will continue to be freely available to participants beyond the workshop timeframe, the program for workshop activities will be further streamlined. Given that the question of assessment of online discussion has been considered relevant all along, but has suffered from lack of time for inclusion, the next workshop should focus on fewer activities and allow time for a simple peer- and self-assessment to be carried out. A proposed program may include a small group activity (to explore issues of active and passive members), synchronous chat with an agenda posted by email, reflective journals and actual assessment of online discussion.

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