

2001

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## Publication details

O'Reilly, M & Brown, JM 2001, 'Staff development by immersion in interactive learning online', *Proceedings of AusWeb2001 Conference*, Coffs Harbour, NSW, 21-25 April, Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW, pp. 259-268.

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# Staff Development By Immersion In *InterActive Learning Online*

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## Abstract

This is a story from an Australian perspective of the changes in staff development approaches over the past few years, in response to the rapidly changing educational and technological environments. In particular the authors reflect upon initiatives implemented and those planned for the future at Southern Cross University, as a result of the impact of staff development activities in our own institution and in other Australian universities to date. The paper concludes with a plan for the Teaching and Learning Centre's website to move beyond delivery of information, exemplars and resources, to support a program of active immersion of staff in the experiences of learning online. One such resource, *interActive Learning Online*, designed for both stand-alone and seminar-based use, is to be part of an online staff development program in mid-2001.

## Introduction - Academics learning

In a broad sense, the most apparent form of professional development undertaken by academic staff relates to the research and publication they regularly complete in their own discipline areas. Developing new knowledge and new understanding, as well as sharing these developments in collegial discourse at conferences and through published articles, is a most creative, engaging and rewarding learning activity, both intrinsically through the benefits of self-development and extrinsically through sabbaticals and promotions etc.

The development of the art and science of teaching on the other hand, is not so readily supported or rewarded in an academic domain. As we know, lecturers have rarely obtained specific teaching qualifications and those who have, do not necessarily continue to examine or critique their teaching strategies as part of their own professional development, as the institutional support for this kind of activity can be rather rhetorical (Johnston, 1998).

As a further contrast, "staff development" activities are not only different in their nomenclature, somehow indicating that they address concerns not

associated with the professional milieu of one's disciplinary peers, but also they are often perceived as remedial offerings by the Teaching and Learning Centres or similar, or other external providers. Wherever there is an absence of institutional culture that demonstrates that teachers deserve assistance and support, staff development activities will struggle to foster real engagement with the research and theory on teaching and learning. As Ramsden et al (1995, p17) put it:

To locate academic teaching within a professional context would mean recognising that improvement is possible and desirable for all teachers, regardless of their experience and expertise, rather than perceiving teacher improvement as remediation...

Furthermore, the role of teachers has always centred around interaction. Though this may have been a little less apparent in the period when distance education meant "correspondence" in print, the current availability of network technology has brought interaction back to a more familiar place in the teaching and learning process, virtually regardless of mode of study. However, online interaction is different from other forms of interaction and the development of skills and expertise in facilitation and support is urgently required.

Teaching now involves a much expanded knowledge base which includes the need to understand computer hardware, software, network technology and to have some grasp of new pedagogies (Ellis, O'Reilly & Debreceeny, 1998). This situation applies to all teachers, not only those new to teaching since very few teaching staff today can refer to their own experiences as online learners. 'The pervasive nature of the technology itself is a strong agent for change' (Koppi et al, 1998), but in the application of technology based solutions to the processes of teaching and learning, it is critical to maintain a pedagogical rationale for change, and for staff to know at a visceral level what it means to be learning in a technology-mediated environment.

## **Integrated staff development projects**

Several recent examples can be found of universities coordinating their strategies to better support staff development for 'flexible teaching and learning', 'flexible delivery' or 'online delivery'. Although the term 'flexible delivery' is particularly repugnant to those of us who consider the importance of pedagogy in driving our teaching strategies, it is a commonly used term to indicate a sort of 'push-button' use of the network. As such, it does not warrant academic programs of professional development.

Where universities have adopted a more broad based approach to staff development, the agenda for flexibility has encompassed the collaboration of:

- specialised course development teams (including educational designers, web designers and project managers),
- learning development staff who may or may not be empowered to

- build the achievement of a range of generic skills into the course objectives (such as information literacy, teamwork collaboration and communication),
- administrative staff to enable online enrolment and cross-credit procedures,
  - information technology staff and web-based course designers
  - librarians to support lecturers in course development, and students involved in flexible learning (Lefoe, 2000).

Two such examples of integrated approaches to staff development can be seen in Australia at the University of Wollongong and at Macquarie University.

Lefoe (2000) describes the recent progress made at University of Wollongong (UoW) in amalgamating the range of existing supports for teaching and learning, as well as supplementing these with video and web-based resources for team based course development. In the context of preparing for 'flexible delivery', staff development at UoW includes the delivery of information, interaction and links to internet resources as a rich assortment of options for staff. Lefoe describes this choice of options as an example of 'practising what we preach' in terms of flexibility in staff development.

Describing the initiatives at Macquarie University, Litchfield (2000) demonstrates how a funded strategic approach to staff development over an eighteen month period, succeeded in raising awareness and skills of staff as well as increasing the adoption of information technology in their teaching practices. The capacity to integrate technology applications into the teaching and learning was clearly enhanced through the multiple levels and diversity of professional development activities supported.

These two examples demonstrate a range of methods which expose staff to the theories, principles and debates around course design, development and delivery in the context of flexibility. What is still not evident in these examples is the direct experience necessary for staff to become skilled facilitators of online learning.

## **Web-based staff development**

At Southern Cross University, staff development has included similar approaches as those at Wollongong and Macquarie, though without the funding support. The activities of the Teaching and Learning Centre have therefore included careful observation and evaluation of the activities of others (Ellis, O'Reilly & Debreceeny, 1998; O'Reilly, Ellis & Newton, 2000). These evaluations have revealed the under-utilisation of the web environment itself to support staff development activities.

The study by O'Reilly, Ellis & Newton (2000) which examined the publicly accessible web pages of all Australian Universities, sadly did not reveal a great deal of web-based support being offered to staff to further their understanding

and experience of web-based course design, or strategies for teaching, learning and online assessment. Although the limitations of the study clearly relate to only that which could be found in publicly accessible areas, the authors make a strong argument for universities to make such staff development resources and activities, openly available, if they exist at all. This finding was also echoed by Kandlbinder (2000) whose critique of the features of web-pages hosted by staff development units warns that unless the network capabilities are appropriately exploited by staff developers 'the danger is...ADUs [Academic Development Units] come to take the pedagogy for granted and become unintentionally lured into more didactic modes of teaching and learning' (Kandlbinder, 2000, p15).

A little more reassuring is that O'Reilly, Ellis & Newton (2000) identified significant activity on staff development web sites in (a) action research methods of staff development, (b) provision of short courses and workshops, and (c) self-directed professional development packages. Several such tutorial packages can also be found on the web pages of the National Council for Open and Distance Education, currently hosted by University of Wollongong <http://cedir.uow.edu.au/NCODE> This indicates that some attempts at using the online medium in a way which appropriately requires the engagement of tutorial participants are evident, freely accessible and can form the basis for both stand-alone and seminar-based implementation. Indeed one of these resources (O'Reilly, 1999) arose from Southern Cross University as a direct result of findings from the published review of staff development approaches to online teaching and learning across Australia (Ellis, O'Reilly & Debreceeny, 1998).

## **A staff immersion program**

It remains the case, however, that most staff development resources and activities are at arm's length to the needs of staff. This is so, both due to the lack of intrinsic knowledge of learning needs in an unfamiliar environment (staff don't always know what they don't know until faced with circumstances in their teaching), as well as a lack of institutional rewards for gaining expertise in facilitation of online learning.

In order to keep pace with current shifts in teaching innovation, staff development programs must immediately accede to the fact that it is the design and not the technology which impacts upon learning (Kandlbinder, 2000). It is therefore none too soon that at Southern Cross University we are designing a learning experience for staff which will immerse them in the role of online students, developing the skills and learning about the potentials for online interaction. In Brookfield's (1993, p21) words:

I argue that regularly experiencing what it feels like to learn something unfamiliar and difficult is the best way to help teachers empathise with the emotions and feelings of their own learners as they begin to traverse new intellectual terrains.

We would add to this that immersion in the online environment through a series of focussed interActivities, prepares one not only intellectually, but also emotionally and practically. Learners online quickly face their preferences for working individually or collaboratively and very soon find out the amount of time required for reading and participating in online group discussions. Recent evaluations of three 'Virtual Seminar' programs run by the ICDE (Bernath & Rubin, 2001), calculated that over a 10-week period, the volume of text generated by an average total of 40 participants, ranged between 167—500 pages.

In the course of delivering and evaluating these seminars, the Seminar Leaders identified the need to develop a more comprehensive professional development or training program for teaching staff who are involved in such online activities. 'It was apparent to the authors that the demand for such training was rapidly increasing and the providers were few and far between' (Bernath & Rubin, 2001, p222). However, the evaluation also found that subsequent to the professional development gained in a virtual seminar, participants were applying the seminar concepts and facilitating their own computer conferences, seminars and tutorials.

It is therefore clear that the age-old American Indian saying '*Tell me, and I'll listen. Show me, and I'll understand. Involve me, and I'll learn*' still bears truth in our online world today. In this context of interaction both in the classroom and online, Jona (2000) lists some principles for creating effective learning environments:

- learning by doing
- learning from mistakes
- learning from stories.

These three simple but powerful principles describe a learning situation which is created with the learner as an active participant, stimulates the inquiring mind and supports the motivation to seek direction when errors are made or knowledge is missing. Momentum may be created through stories, guiding scenarios or simulations, and exchanges of perspective between learners and facilitators.

As far as finding academic staff in the role of learners as they undertake their own professional development, in his preliminary analysis, Becher (1996) identified seven approaches commonly taken:

1. courses and conferences,
2. professional interactions,
3. networking,
4. consulting experts,
5. personal research,
6. learning by doing, and
7. learning by teaching.

In a bold move to address all seven of these approaches, the Teaching and Learning Centre at Southern Cross University is engaged in a project designed to involve staff at a hands-on level in exploring theory and practice of online pedagogy. The project includes both the development of a resource and the concurrent evaluation of its effectiveness.

## interActive Learning Online

*interActive Learning Online* centres on a website which can be used as a stand-alone self-paced tutorial or utilised in conjunction with a short facilitated seminar, similar to the 'Virtual Seminar' series run by the ICDE, as described above. We aim to immerse staff as learners in a computer mediated 'space' which facilitates professional interactions and creates conditions for them to network with peers and other colleagues with particular experience in this area. By doing this we hope to motivate participants to further their own personal research of the theory and literature as well as gain experience in 'hands-online' interactivity which, we believe, can provide the missing element in their development toward effective online teaching practices.

The seminar requires staff to sign in on the project for a month (6 hours/week) and positions them as students in a collaborative educational web environment. Southern Cross University has adopted CourseInfo as its online delivery system and *interActive Learning Online* will employ the capabilities of this environment for managing online interaction among participants and as a gateway to materials located on the web. This is a deliberate choice to situate the content in a publicly accessible area, while using the CourseInfo gateway through which enrolled participation can occur. Lecturers are thus gaining an opportunity to be students in the structured web environment which they are likely to be using for their teaching work.

The site invites participants to...

- experience the features of this new technology-mediated **teaching environment**
- articulate characteristic exemplars of their particular **disciplinary philosophy and practice**
- explore new parameters of **communication and community** that emerge in the intersection of networked digital media and disciplinary exemplars.

The graphical interface for *interActive Learning Online* leads participants directly to material relating to these three areas. Each area is structured around a commentary linked to various online resources — readings, websites, library databases and discussion areas based around key questions. Engagement with these resources is designed to generate further questions and reflections about the academic's praxis and - in the case of those enrolled - in anecdotes,

discussions and collaborations.

### *The Environment*

This area of the site probes the character of the online environment, exploring its features under such headings as:

- technology centred
- information rich
- interactive
- anarchistic
- non-linear, hypertext
- multimedia
- geographically dispersed
- networked (rhizomatic), nodal
- time and space flexibilities.

Links exemplifying these features are provided as well as theoretical papers about the cultural significance of the new environment - for example, Novak's (1991, p225) observations:

Cyberspace is a completely spatialized visualization of all information in global information processing systems, along pathways provided by present and future communications networks, enabling full copresence and interaction of multiple users, allowing input and output from and to the full human sensorium, permitting simulations of real and virtual realities, remote data collection and control through telepresence, and total integration and inter-communication with a full range of intelligent products and environments in real space.

Cyberspace, Novak suggests, represents a subversion of our traditional modes of interacting with information in that, instead of seeing information as external to us, we now enter into it, become a part of it, by representing our *selves* as streams of digital data. The implications for higher education of such new conceptions of learning space, our relations with others and with knowledge and information flow can be explored through online interaction. Another focus for interaction may be the ways in which the features of an online environment simulate elements of the face-to-face learning space and encompass the dispersed geographies of traditional distance education, as well as introducing unique contingencies of their own. The question of whether and in what contexts online environments may be engendering a paradigm shift in higher education pedagogy is opened and addressed as a central theme in the third area of Communication and Community.

### *Disciplinary Exemplars*

In this area, participants are asked to identify typical exemplars of the teaching philosophy and practices in their particular disciplinary areas. They are asked to consider the location of these exemplars along two continuums:

- instructive ⇔ constructive
- vocational ⇔ philosophical

The different uses of online exchange can be examined in relation to these continuums. For example: instructionally oriented disciplines offering courses such as computer programming may be inclined to utilise online forums for students to check in with each other about correct coding or procedures (requiring convergent thinking). Constructional disciplines, in which collaborative negotiations about meaning and interpretation are to the fore, are likely to use online forums to critique ideas and issues, to explore their varied implications (requiring divergent thinking).

Disciplinary parameters intersect with the features of the online environment to shape the kinds of communication and learning community that may emerge.

### *Communication & Community*

The central concern of this area of the site is the kinds of communication structures and processes that can emerge in the intersecting contexts of an online educational environment and disciplinary exigencies. The notion that network technologies may be driving a major paradigm shift in distance education is explored. For example, Palloff and Pratt (1999 p.5) comment that:

In the online arena, the instructor may continue to define course content and drive the course. However, there is a great deal of room for students to explore the content collaboratively or to pursue their own, related interests. No longer is there a unidirectional imparting of knowledge by an "expert" on a particular topic. No longer is there a necessity for courses to be place- or time-based.

The question of what strategies may be employed in the facilitation of online interActivity is explored in some depth in this area of the project with an array of practical examples. The kinds of activities which Bonk et al (2000) provide in their list of suggestions ought to be experienced by staff in order for them to know what to expect of these strategies, of the students' participation, and learning outcomes. Bonk et al's (2000) list is extensive and includes: ice-breakers; starter-wrapper; peer feedback roles; jigsaw; reading reactions; field observation reactions; structured controversy; topical discussions; cases; interactive peer and guest commenting; debates; round-robin activities; brainstorming and many more. In order to appreciate the effectiveness of these techniques, teaching staff are given the opportunity to experience those which they feel would be usefully applied in their own subject areas and which meet

the immediate learning objectives they have set.

Participants are asked to locate and create exemplars of innovative practice in online interaction and exchange in their respective disciplines and to critically examine the ways in which these 'add value' or, perhaps, detract from traditional practices. Responses in the form of written expression, argument, role play, critical analysis, synthesis of ideas, collaboration, debate and persuasion are elicited via online forums — both synchronous and asynchronous.

## Outcomes

We anticipate that the value of this staff development project will be an increased awareness in the academic community of Southern Cross University and visitors to the website, about the value and possibilities of teaching and learning online. An evaluation is to be conducted on first delivery in mid-2001.

The project will be presented fully online and is designed as a practical and theoretical resource for lecturers wishing to utilise the interactive potentials of the web in their teaching. It provides a rich base of online resources from which to draw information, practical ideas, theoretical frameworks and self-reflexive activities. It will also offer the option of *immersion* in online interActive learning experiences through a structured month-long seminar. Such seminars will be scheduled for recess periods between semesters of teaching and incorporate input from guest academics with particular experience in teaching and learning online. Most importantly, we hope that staff participating in this project will gain a *visceral* sense of the power and flexibility of new technologies as a pedagogical tool.

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