Professional development for online university teaching

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Almost every higher education institution is challenged to develop increasing numbers of staff to teach online or blended modes of learning. The process needs to be rapid, cost-effective and lead directly to practical outcomes. From our experience, we had little time, opportunity or the need to start from scratch, and we chose to adopt and adapt a course that was based on a well-rehearsed and respected pedagogical model. We offer our experience to date as a case study with some extracted principles for others to explore and follow. We discuss the value of contextualization, incremental innovation, and mentoring of online convenors. This article will be of interest to those seeking to provide effective professional development routes for large numbers of staff.

Keywords: contextualization; mentoring; e-moderating; professional development; online teaching; capacity building

Context and background

Swinburne University of Technology in Melbourne, Australia, has recently established a 2020 Vision (Swinburne University of Technology, 2013), which includes a focus on all students and staff working online in blended or entirely digital modes. The Learning Transformation Unit, in which both the authors work, is charged with offering appropriate development in innovative online skills for all academic staff. Here we describe the process of choice and development of a short, online, asynchronous professional development course which increasingly meets the needs for developing online teaching skills at Swinburne.

Most academic teachers in higher education learn to teach largely through apprenticeship in their disciplines and will therefore teach as they themselves were taught (García, Arias, Murri, & Serna, 2010). As few current academics have online experience either as student or teacher (McQuiggan, 2012), online teaching is a move into the unfamiliar, entailing risk-taking and challenges to their beliefs. Although many universities are addressing this issue through their own staff development programs, there is a tendency for professional development to teach about teaching theory and alienate large numbers of potential online teachers who want practical guides (Armellini & Jones, 2008; Salmon, 2013). Any significant initiative aimed at changing teaching methods, or the introduction of technology into teaching and learning, should include effective support and training as well as the opportunity for academics to own the changes through the experience of alternate approaches where they can "express and test in action what they have learned" (Kolb & Kolb, 2005, p. 208). These initiatives should also work within an authentic context to enable integration of learning into practice (Bell, Maeng, & Binns, 2013).

Crebbin (1997) suggests that because teaching is so inextricably bound with the identity of the person, any changes in teaching entail an element of risk-taking requiring changes in personal beliefs rather than simply the addition of new skills. Åkerlind (2011)

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argues that centrally organized approaches to teaching development, which are "typically addressed in isolation from academics' development as a whole" (p. 194) may not be beneficial to their development as teachers. It is important then to find approaches that enable academics to develop not only their conceptions of teaching but to explore their beliefs and practices within a supportive environment.

Further, in the current climate of change, all staff need to engage with online delivery, not simply the innovators and early adopters who may persist with more or less good grace, although some burn out (Watts & Robertson, 2011) or become demoralized in the attempt (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). For some, the battle is lost early on, and they become convinced that satisfactory knowledge transmission and construction can only occur face to face. However, if early in the process participants are enabled to be active online participants themselves, they see the benefits and are motivated to acquire the skills (Crawford, 2010; Salmon, 2011). Online courses that have moved away from a transmission model to those that "see the learners' experience as central to knowledge construction" (Salmon, 2011, p. 5) can enable academic staff to explore new delivery mediums while they also "develop new ideas about teaching and learning" (McQuiggan, 2012, p. 28).

E-moderation, the term used to describe a particular strategy of interaction for creating quality, personal and effective interactivity between the learner and the teacher (Salmon, 2011) is one such approach. Salmon (2011) describes the "essential role of the e-moderator… [as] promoting human interaction and communication through the modelling, conveying and building of knowledge and skills" (p. 5) in online environments. E-moderating is firmly based on the idea of scaffolding learning through five stages (Salmon, 2011), which enable learners to gradually move from the known to the unknown (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2002) and "learn about working online *along with* learning about the topic, and with and through other people" (Salmon, 2011, p. 31). Working online requires interaction with content, between teacher and student, and between groups of peers facilitated by the e-moderator (Salmon, 2011).

An established staff development course, designed to provide teachers with the skills to become effective e-moderators, was developed by one of the authors, Professor Gilly Salmon, and has been successfully delivered entirely digitally through a small company, All Things in Moderation Ltd (ATIMOD) for over 10 years. Our challenge and opportunity was to draw on this well-rehearsed e-moderating course to develop an efficient and effective online course for professional development for and with Swinburne staff. Professor Janet Gregory, the other author, was charged with setting up appropriate arrangements with the director of ATIMOD.

The case study

The case study presented in this article seeks to demonstrate how we sought to establish an effective process for the development of contextualized knowledge and skills in online teaching to enhance student learning outcomes. The approach we present could be applied to the adoption and adaptation of any established professional development course to meet organizational requirements. Swinburne already has considerable experience in offering entirely digital courses. It was one of the original partners with Open Universities Australia and offers entirely online programs through the private company Swinburne Online. In our example, we were keen to rapidly further develop the online capability of staff. We wished to intervene fast but also allow continuous improvement to meet the increasing requirements for online and blended delivery at Swinburne.

The intervention process

To meet our objective of providing contextualized professional development for online teaching by establishing an approach that could be quickly applied and rapidly scaled, we undertook a process of establishing and implementing the course while also developing staff and making incremental changes. Figure 1 demonstrates the intervention and feedback framework that guided the establishment and implementation, through various iterations, of the e-moderating course at Swinburne.
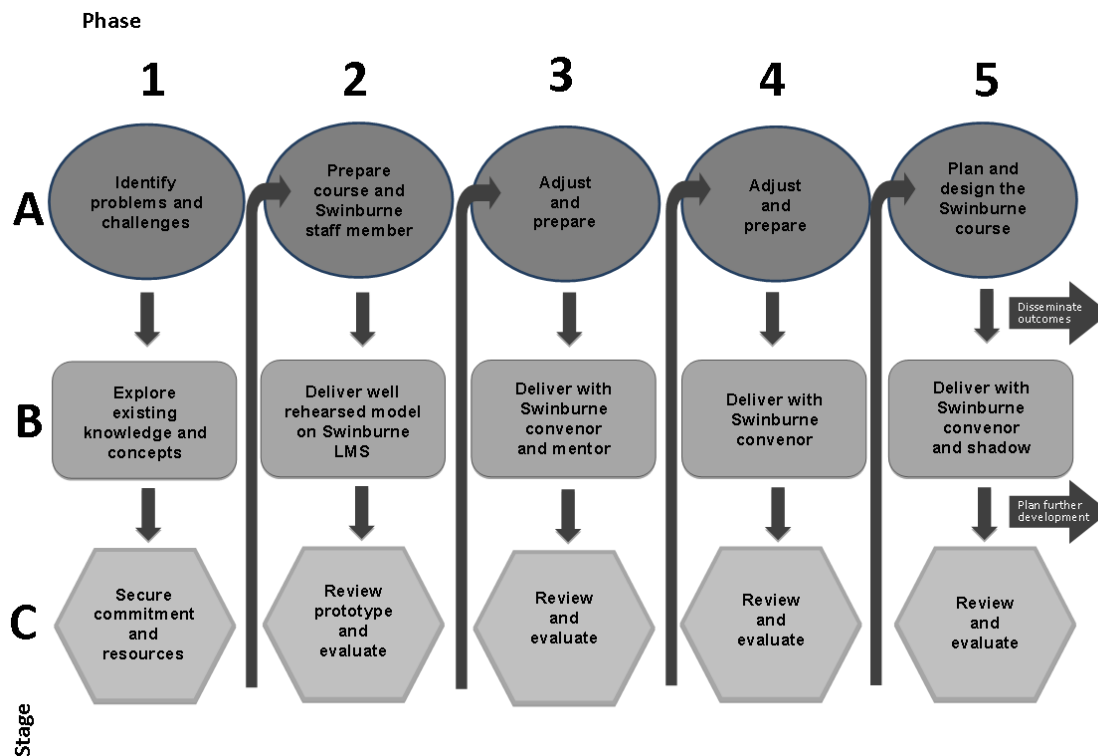

Figure 1. Intervention and feedback framework.

Phase 1 (Step A)–Identify problems and challenges

Swinburne's commitment to rapidly and effectively developing its online presence requires staff to have the capacity and capability to deliver high quality online units and programs. For some Swinburne staff, particularly those who have not yet studied or taught online, they are moving into the territory of unknown and unfamiliar practices (Dirckinck-Holmfeld, 2002). For those already teaching online, the opportunity to both consolidate and develop new skills is critically important. Laurillard (2012) highlights the tendency for organizations to focus on funding technology rather than staff development, a risk we felt needed to be addressed by ensuring staff development that would assist staff to utilize the technology while developing their design and delivery skills. Further, Swinburne wishes not only to enable the rapid development of online teaching skills, but also to contribute to changing learning approaches and extend new understandings about possible futures for learning in higher education across the organization, requiring staff to be confident and capable in new learning environments.

Phase 1 (Step B)–Explore existing knowledge and concepts

We knew that, where an institution seeks to successfully and rapidly scale up to digital modes of delivery, lack of support for academic staff to manage the necessary technical

infrastructure, or to sustain the developments to critical mass, are likely to result in, at best, disappointment for students and at worst, a waste of initiatives and resources (Salmon, 2011). Research and practice point to the need for university teachers, new and experienced and at all levels of education, to acquire new skills in creating, managing, and promoting student participation in interactive conferencing online (Barajas & Gannaway, 2007; Smet, van Keer, & Valcke, 2008). These skills are more important but harder to acquire than technical ability in a particular platform. Key attention also needs to be given to enable them to gain confidence and professionalism, and to continue to develop (Michinov, Brunot, Le Bohec, Juhel, & Delaval, 2011; Underhill & McDonald, 2010).

We take the view that approaches to promoting the acquisition of online teaching skills should take place through digital platforms and environments for two reasons. First, staff benefit from becoming learners in the online environment and experiencing what their students experience; and second, an embedded approach to the development of knowledge and skills is much more likely to impact on their teaching practice (Salmon, 2011).

We were already aware of the ATIMOD course, and a search of other options confirmed our view that this would best suit Swinburne's needs. Janet Gregory reviewed a number of professional development courses for online teaching, including e-moderating, before presenting a business case to senior management. It should be noted that Swinburne already had experience of the e-moderating course—Janet Gregory and a number of other staff had participated in the public course—and therefore some confidence in its suitability for our needs.

The e-moderating course run by All Things in Moderation Ltd (http://www.atimod.com) is based on social constructivist principles and was originally developed for the United Kingdom (UK) Open University Business school tutors in the early days of e-moderating (Salmon, 2011). The course has been further developed into a fully online course and successfully offered to individuals and institutions to promote the development of online teaching skills across the world from 2001. It is based on a well-developed model with action research underpinning its long-term development (Salmon, 2011, 2013). The public e-moderating course runs for 4 weeks in asynchronous mode, and is very structured and paced. Salmon's 5-stage model provided the framework for access and motivation, establishing an online learning set, enabling cooperation and then collaboration, while also allowing for individual and personalized development (Salmon, 2011). The design is based on around 30 small interactive activities; online tasks called e-tivities (Salmon, 2013).

A number of options were available to us: for Swinburne staff to participate in the public ATIMOD course; for the course to be run for Swinburne staff by an ATIMOD experienced facilitator; or for the ATIMOD convenor to mentor Swinburne staff to run the course themselves in the future. In considering these options we decided that adopting the ATIMOD course design and materials and enabling gradual adaptation would facilitate our strategy of cascading the learning, reducing costs and enabling continuity and sustainability, while gradually moving toward our overall aim of effectively increasing the online teaching skills of academic staff. Macdonald and Poniatowska (2011) stress the importance of understanding working contexts for effective professional development. We recognized that a course contextualized to Swinburne, to Australia, and where appropriate, to a discipline or profession, would likely be the most well received by staff and would enable immediate application to practice.

We decided to call the facilitator of the courses a convenor (someone who invokes others to come together for a purpose), the term generally used within Swinburne for those responsible for managing courses.

Phase 1 (Step C)–Secure commitment and resources

An agreement was negotiated to prepare ATIMOD course materials on the Swinburne learning management system (LMS) and run one trial course for Swinburne staff, managed by an experienced convenor from ATIMOD. We agreed that the first author (Janet Gregory), who had already completed the public e-moderating course, would work alongside the ATIMOD convenor in order to develop the skills needed to run the course in the future. We saw this as a shadowing role. It was agreed that shadowing would involve observation of all aspects of the course and regular meetings with the ATIMOD convenor to discuss their observations and aspects of the e-moderator role. The ATIMOD convenor agreed that after the first Swinburne course we could make changes to the course material and approach where appropriate to adapt it for the local context and needs. Following the presentation of a business case to Swinburne senior executives, approval was given for the first course to proceed.

We identified that there were three key contextualizing elements in supporting successful implementation: the design of the course, the efficacy of the LMS on which it is based, and the experience of the human element—the trainer of the university teachers (our convenor). Each of these elements would need to be addressed and evaluated as we developed the course for Swinburne. Table 1 provides a brief overview of these three elements across the four courses.

Table 1. The schedule of courses: a brief overview.

Course	Course design and materials	Convening role
Course 1	Standard course from ATIMOD, mounted onto Blackboard Learn^{TM}	Experienced ATIMOD convenor with Swinburne shadow
Course 2	Improvements based mainly on the platform (Blackboard Learn) and some change in use of language to make relevant to Australia	Swinburne shadow becomes main convenor; ATIMOD convenor continues to mentor
Course 3	Introduction of new technology (Blackboard Collaborate^{TM}, a synchronous virtual classroom)	Swinburne convenor
Course 4	Significant improvements including new structure for e-tivities, introduction of visual 'sparks' to start the dialogue, new e-tivities on open educational resources and greater use of Blackboard Collaborate and audio feedback	Swinburne convenor shadowed and supported by a Swinburne alumni of the e-moderating course

Phase 2 (Step A) Course 1–Prepare course and Swinburne shadow

Prior to the course commencing, a number of discussions were held between the ATIMOD convenor and the Swinburne shadow to discuss relevant local context, to prepare the Swinburne staff member for the shadow role, and to enable these individuals to become acquainted with each other before commencing the course. No specific changes were made to the course as it was already well developed; however, ATIMOD

staff were given access to Swinburne's LMS, Blackboard Learn 9.1, to upload the ATIMOD e-moderating course material and ensure that all the technical aspects of the change to a new LMS were covered.

The first e-moderating course was advertised to all Swinburne staff through newsletters and discussions with key senior staff. The course was offered free of charge with staff committing their own time as a professional development activity. Participants were accepted based on their expressed interest rather than role or experience, and, as Swinburne is a dual sector institution, the course was offered to staff in both the Higher Education division and the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) division. This approach supported our view that making the course available and spreading the word was a more effective starting position than requiring participation by any one group of staff. Our plan to establish a sustainable means to develop knowledge and skills was predicated on the assumption that we wanted support and commitment from staff rather than compliance.

We decided that certificates would be awarded to all participants who satisfactorily completed the course. A small graduation ceremony would be held to present the certificates and give participants a chance to meet each other outside the online environment and celebrate the success of completion.

Phase 2 (Step B)–Deliver well-rehearsed course on Swinburne LMS

The first 4-week, entirely online e-moderating course for Swinburne staff was moderated by the ATIMOD convenor who was very experienced in running public e-moderating courses. The role of the Swinburne shadow was to closely observe how the external facilitator managed the course and his interactions with the participants. The shadow role also enabled focus on the course and its application within Swinburne. In experiential learning, attention is "focused on the task at hand, observational learners face no immediate task demands, potentially freeing up cognitive resources to perceive whichever aspects of a task are chosen by the learner as a point of focus" (Hoover, Giambatista, & Belkin, 2012, p. 592). To ensure that perceptions and reflections were explored, weekly meetings between the convenor and shadow were conducted via Skype as the ATIMOD convenor was in the UK. The role of the ATIMOD convenor was to mentor the Swinburne shadow, a role designed to ensure that "specific knowledge and skills are transferred from one to the other but with the intention of fostering independence" (Garvey, Stokes, & Megginson, 2009, p. 21). The relationship of the mentor and mentee is important to the success of any mentoring endeavour (Garvey et al., 2009), hence the regular Skype sessions, which allowed for the development of a relationship as well as sharing of thoughts and ideas.

Phase 2 (Step C)–Review prototype and evaluate

The first course commenced with 14 participants, with 10 completing the full course. The course started off with a lot of enthusiasm—there were 366 posts in Week 1—with participants responding to each other even more than required by the e-tivities. A few participants dropped out in Weeks 2 and 3; however, those who completed were active throughout the course with 115 posts registered in Week 4. It is worth noting here that the large number of posts in Week 1, many of them short, were early socialization or getting-to-know-you discussions, while later in the course the e-tivities were more demanding and required more thoughtful responses, hence a lower volume of posts was to be expected.

The ATIMOD convenor and Swinburne shadow reviewed the first course and agreed on some small changes for the next course, particularly in response to the number

of complaints about the LMS. Given this course had been moved from an external LMS, it was agreed to review the layout and structure of the course to align it more closely with Blackboard Learn in an attempt to reduce the focus on technical difficulties. In addition, it was agreed to review language to contextualize the course for Swinburne and to rewrite some of the e-tivities and instructions.

Phase 3 (Step A) Course 2–Adjust and prepare

Prior to the commencement of the second course, which commenced 4 weeks after the completion of the first course, adjustments were made. The Swinburne staff member who shadowed in the first course became the convenor and worked with Swinburne learning technologists to change the layout and language, and better design it for the Blackboard Learn LMS. For example, the first course used a blog for information and this was changed to use the announcement function in Blackboard Learn to align with common practice in Swinburne; the menu panel was changed to enable easier navigation; and the language was changed to reflect the context of Blackboard Learn and the Swinburne environment, including the change of reference from virtual learning environment (VLE) to LMS.

Changes were also made to some of the e-tivities in the course. The first e-tivity, which originally asked participants "what it was like to get access to this course" (more appropriate for the public course as people come into a new LMS) was changed to "introduce yourself and tell us what has motivated you to undertake this course and what you hope to learn." It was anticipated that this would shift the emphasis from the LMS itself to the other participants, thereby reducing the focus on technical issues and encouraging interaction. The task in an early e-tivity explicitly relating to working with the LMS was changed from "post a short message to say how easy to use you find this VLE" to "if you are an experienced Blackboard user (or have recently learnt something useful about Blackboard) please share one or two tips that could be useful to others. If you have very little experience and questions you would like answered please post your question to the group so that others can assist." The intent was to foster a culture of sharing tips and tricks so that participants could learn from each other. Other changes included clearer instructions for the group wiki to reduce the number of queries that arose, and the inclusion of an approximate time commitment and expected word count for each e-tivity to provide guidance for participants.

The Swinburne convenor reflected on the experience of observing and shadowing throughout the first course, and prepared to convene the second course by discussing strategies with the ATIMOD mentor, setting aside sufficient time to effectively convene the 4-week course.

Phase 3 (Step B)–Deliver with Swinburne convenor and ATIMOD mentor

The second course commenced with 16 participants enrolled, with 11 completing. There were a total of 303 posts in Week 1, and 146 during Week 4, demonstrating again a steady level of contribution throughout the course. The Swinburne shadow was now the main convenor, with the ATIMOD convenor providing support and guidance, thereby enabling the Swinburne convenor to further reflect and develop her knowledge and skills.

Continuing the process established during the shadowing phase, the convenors held weekly Skype meetings in addition to e-mail correspondence. E-mail was used for sending drafts of the convenor's proposed responses to participants, and for gaining advice on managing exchanges. The Skype discussions focused on reflection and knowledge development based on experiences. Even though the convenor was an experienced teacher and facilitator, this support and opportunity for discussion and

reflection enabled quick development of skills and knowledge to a level that would ensure the course provided an excellent experience for participants.

Phase 3 (Step C)–Review and evaluate

The changes that had been made to the course design and structure were effective, with much less concern about the LMS and technical issues from participants and a noticeably quicker sense of group cohesion. The new e-tivity worked well with participants sharing knowledge about Blackboard Learn, and it was clear that the new structure on Blackboard Learn was easier to navigate. We considered that the course was now well embedded within Blackboard and that terminology and layout issues arising from the change of platforms had been addressed—this is particularly important to ensure the smooth running of the course, and to reduce the workload for the convenor in responding to queries if links are not functional or language is not clear.

Phase 4 (Step A) Course 3–Adjust and prepare

One of the significant advantages of the course now being embedded within Swinburne was the opportunity to respond quickly to changes within the organisation and introduce these as part of the course. For example, Blackboard Collaborate, a virtual classroom tool embedded within Blackboard Learn, was becoming available to all Swinburne staff, so it was decided to introduce an optional Blackboard Collaborate session into the e-moderating course to give participants a taste of how this option could be used for teaching purposes.

Phase 4 (Step B)–Swinburne convenor delivers solo

The third e-moderating course commenced with 15 participants enrolled and 8 completing. This was the first course that the Swinburne convenor had facilitated without support from the ATIMOD convenor. The course ran smoothly with no technical difficulties and with all e-tivities progressing well; however, the participants in this course struggled immensely with time because it was a busy period of semester. This became particularly problematic in Week 3 when the small group work task occurred, to the point where the convenor gave a class extension of a week.

As with the previous iterations, the participants who did finish the course stayed active throughout the course, however with such a small number of participants there were generally fewer posts—199 in Week 1 and 95 in Week 3—and at times it was harder to maintain momentum in discussions. The optional synchronous virtual classroom session was attended by 5 of the 8 participants. For this course Blackboard Collaborate was offered as an additional option with the session focusing on using the tool rather than as an embedded activity within the course.

Phase 4 (Step C)–Review and evaluate

The conclusion of the third course, with a break before offering the fourth course, provided an opportunity to reflect on the overall design of the course and desired future directions. A number of key elements emerged from feedback provided by the participants and the observations of the convenors. In particular, the issues were:

(a) Participation—particularly workload and levels of attrition
(b) Contextualization of the course for Swinburne
(c) Presentation—new structure for e-tivities and the introduction of visuals.

Each of these issues was worked on over the ensuing months in preparation for Course 4, which was scheduled to run in early 2013. Along with design developments, the convenor commenced focusing on scaling up the program, which required the development of more Swinburne convenors, so the decision was made to have a participant from one of the earlier courses shadow the convenor during the next iteration.

Phase 5 (Step A) Course 4–Plan and design the Swinburne course

A challenge in further adapting the course to the Swinburne context was to ensure that the sound and well-developed pedagogical design of the course structure and online e-tivities was maintained, while also bringing in new elements and drawing on new technologies relevant to the local context. The convenor worked closely with a learning technologist to develop the course based on participant feedback and observations and the emergence of key areas.

(a) Participation

There had been significant attrition from each course and it was clear that many staff were having difficulty in meeting the time commitment, perhaps not realizing how much work would be involved even though this was communicated prior to enrolment. The first decision was to change the course from 4 to 5 weeks and be more sensitive about its timing within the teaching calendar. The second consideration was the degree of commitment. As there was no cost for staff to participate, and no formal recognition, it was decided to establish a more formal enrolment system requiring participants to obtain approval from their line manager prior to enrolling in the course. This step was designed to increase commitment from participants and ensure that undertaking the course was recognized within Swinburne's performance management process as a developmental activity. It was also decided to over-enrol to allow for attrition and ensure the course had sufficient participants for a dynamic experience.

(b) Contextualization

The process of contextualizing the course commenced with Course 2 and the subsequent adaptations of Blackboard Learn, terminology, and the introduction of Blackboard Collaborate. While Blackboard Collaborate was introduced as an optional session in Course 3, for the redesign of the course in 2013 it was planned to embed this virtual classroom as one of the e-tivities within the course. The activities relating to Blackboard Learn had also led to some interesting and informative discussions among participants, and it was decided to use this as a basis to establish a FAQ (frequently asked questions) section that would be facilitated by the educational technologist during future courses and draw on staff knowledge and experience.

Contextualizing the course also created opportunities for other staff to become involved where appropriate. For example, an agreement was established with the Swinburne Library to incorporate awareness of digital resources and acknowledgement of open education resources into the course, and for a librarian to facilitate the e-tivity that addressed these issues.

(c) Presentation

The employment of an educational technologist reporting directly to the convenor provided the opportunity to further develop the look and feel of the course. As a way of further engaging participants and applying the concept of "a spark to start the dialogue" (Salmon, 2002, 2013) visual images were incorporated within each of the activities. Some of these were developed by the educational technologist and others were obtained from

open source sites. In addition to the introduction of new design and technologies, a new framework for e-tivities was introduced based on the work of Salmon (2013). Many of the e-tivities were rewritten, while keeping the fundamental scaffolding and structure of the course based on the 5-stage model to ensure that the learning outcomes would be achieved (Salmon, 2013).

Phase 5 (Step B)–Deliver with Swinburne convenor and shadow

The first 2013 course enrolled 20 participants, with 13 completing, so while there was still significant attrition, this proved to be a vibrant group as there were enough participants to keep the discussions active. There were 329 posts in Week 1, and the last two weeks of this 5-week course had a total of 273 posts, 147 in Week 4 and 126 in Week 5.

The 2013 iteration of the course was a highly visual product and had a much easier flow with links between all e-tivities, FAQs to address technical issues and a new structure for e-tivities. In addition, this iteration not only introduced Blackboard Collaborate to staff within a specific e-tivity, but utilized more audio technologies and links to images and videos. It was also designed to incorporate input from other staff as well as the convenor. For example, the activity in Week 1 focused on tips and tricks for Blackboard Learn, and an educational technologist was available on the discussion board to answer participants' queries and add suggestions and resources. In Week 5, we developed an activity which focused on the use of open educational resources and a Swinburne librarian was available to answer questions, give guidance, and provide resources for participants.

As the convenor had already run a number of e-moderating courses, this course provided the opportunity to develop another staff member as a convener and commence the process of cascading the knowledge and skills. Consequently, a participant from an earlier course shadowed the convenor throughout the course.

Phase 5 (Step C)–Review and evaluate

Course 4 implemented all the changes discussed above, and with 13 students completing we were confident that our overall design was working effectively. The greater use of visuals and new technologies seemed to have an impact with more participants posting photos and videos, and using audio in their own posts. This may of course also be due to an ever increasing skill base as people use more and more technology in their everyday lives; however, the new-look course also provided a model which encouraged this behaviour. In contrast, however, there were still many comments about the need for more technical assistance, and in response a brief technical training session was developed as an option for future participants commencing the course.

Feedback from many participants during the courses was that they would value the opportunity to continue networking and sharing skills, knowledge, and resources. In response, an e-moderating online community was set up within Swinburne to enable participants to continue sharing ideas, experience, and knowledge, and support each other as they further developed their online teaching skills. The experience of having library staff involved to answer questions about finding and acknowledging resources has also demonstrated the value of developing links wherever possible to bring resources and services to the participants.

The development of another convenor, who will start to convene courses late 2013, has continued the process of cascading the skills and knowledge for convening within Swinburne, and will enable more courses to be offered in 2014. An additional shadow has also been identified who will have the opportunity to shadow and develop

skills. Participants from the e-moderating course were also beginning to apply the skills to their own courses and could seek support and guidance from the convenors. For example, the convenor facilitated the design of a new online course and offered support during the first iteration of this course. This is one of the significant advantages of training and developing local convenors who can continue to offer support and mentoring outside of the e-moderating course itself.

The iterative cycle of planning, implementation, reflection, and evaluation will continue to guide development of the e-moderating course and provide a framework for the convenors as they work to ensure a course that continues to be both relevant and effective.

Conclusions and principles

At Swinburne we recognized that the process for professional development for online teaching skills needed to be rapid and cost-effective, and lead directly to practical outcomes. Our choice to adopt and adapt an existing course, one that was based on a well-rehearsed and respected pedagogical model, resulted in fast implementation of our professional development strategy. Our case study demonstrates that it is possible to provide an effective professional development route for larger numbers of staff. The four intervention cycles we undertook provided an opportunity to continuously adapt and improve the course in ways that made it engaging and relevant to Swinburne staff, and enabled us to develop convenors through an engaging process and a reflective practice. The experience has enabled us to distil some key principles to guide effective, efficient, easily scalable and sustainable professional development activities.

Principle 1: Adapt where possible

The first principle addresses the value of adopting and adapting an existing set of course materials and processes. In our case we selected the ATIMOD e-moderating course as the most appropriate to meet our needs to rapidly develop online teaching skills for Swinburne staff. While we had the option of enrolling staff in the external ATIMOD course or using external ATIMOD convenors to run courses for Swinburne, we chose to adopt and adapt the course for Swinburne with the support of ATIMOD as this removed the costs, time, resources, and risks of developing a course ourselves, and allowed us to use a well-established course while adapting it to meet our specific context. This principle is applicable to the adoption and adaptation of any existing external course, and ensures that universities are not reinventing the wheel and pouring scarce resources into the development of materials that can be accessed from elsewhere. This approach proved much quicker and more effective for us than if we had designed and delivered an entirely new course or if we had continued to enrol staff in the public ATIMOD course. Our approach for all professional development activities hereon will be to seek external materials wherever possible and explore the option of appropriate adaptation.

Principle 2: Contextualize

The second principle relates to the value of contextualization as a means of ensuring authentic learning through incremental adaptation. The first year of the Swinburne e-moderating course and the intervention cycle demonstrated the key contextualizing elements that enabled successful implementation and scaling. The design of the course evolved to ensure that the terminology, structure, technologies, and examples were appropriate to Swinburne, and provided staff with a relevant framework for application to their own teaching and learning practice. For example, the use of the Swinburne LMS (Blackboard Learn) provided a platform for developing technical capacity while also

facilitating the acquisition of e-moderating skills. A critical aspect was that it gave staff the chance to see how the LMS worked from a student perspective, and to explore and experiment with the system in a safe and supportive environment. The process of incremental contextualization enabled us to reflect on feedback and make course improvements, rather than assume that particular approaches would be most effective. It also allowed us to adopt new technologies as they become available within the organisation. This has ensured a dynamic course that, while maintaining the core elements of the ATIMOD course, adapts to changing needs and circumstances.

Principle 3: Creating apprenticeships in online leadership

The third principle recognizes the value of apprenticeship and mentoring for developing staff to convene the course, thereby enabling rapid scaling of the professional development activities across the organisation. The opportunity to develop internal convenors through shadowing and mentoring was a key element in the embedding of the course. The development of one of the authors as a Swinburne convenor was a positive experience, creating opportunities to contextualize the course to Swinburne while also developing the convenor's knowledge and skills. This knowledge could then be passed to further convenors within Swinburne to enable the delivery of more courses while maintaining consistency and quality of approach.

Principle 4: Cascade the word

The fourth principle has been to encourage more staff to take part in the e-moderating courses through recommendation from their faculty colleagues. Many of our participants became advocates and encouraged their faculty colleagues to take part at the next opportunity. There is an increasing interest in this course from academic staff and we take this to mean that there is an appetite amongst staff for the practical and applied lessons gained from taking part in the e-moderating course, and a start in the change of the corporate mindset. There is growing recognition that the course is valuable, both for learning the features and functions of the LMS, but also to experience the richness of technology-enabled learning in a safe environment where staff can experiment and develop confidence in their own online teaching practices. The course has visibly created an opportunity for academics to engage in online learning, reflect on how this knowledge affects their conceptions of teaching, and consider how to apply the experience and theory to their own practice.

Next steps

Our journey and constant iterations continue with a number of key issues still to be addressed. As we scale up and run more courses, we need to understand the reasons for attrition. We are considering options, such as mandatory professional development for online teaching and/or credentialing for the course. As we are currently reviewing our Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching—now fully online—we have an opportunity to give credit for the e-moderating course as part of this program. We are therefore exploring ways of providing aligned, appropriate, and quality assessment for those staff who wish to obtain recognition. To further develop skills we have also created an online community site to share knowledge, and we plan to host events for e-moderating as a means of maintaining networks and further facilitating the sharing of knowledge and skills within an interested and supportive group of staff.

We have commenced research into the impact of the e-moderating course on teaching practice and will be publishing the results of data as well as enabling such feedback to continue to improve the course. We intend to undertake research to further

understand the value of the apprenticeship and mentoring approach and its application to other professional development activities. This framework, which allows us to develop staff who can then cascade the knowledge and skills to colleagues, is an effective and sustainable approach to the rapid development of staff capacity and capability.

Acknowledgements

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