

A Community approach to staff development in eLearning

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Abstract

This narrative seeks to identify practices that have enabled staff in eLearning roles to support their peers to increase the use of eLearning within a New Zealand tertiary education context. Specifically, it examines those factors that have contributed to the development of institutional capability in eLearning over a two-year funded period.

Unitec New Zealand has recently implemented a transformative eLearning Development Strategy with the aim of developing the capability and capacity of Unitec academic staff in integrating learning technologies. The eLearning Strategy has seen the funding of a number of temporary roles to support and foster increased staff capability and capacity in eLearning. These roles have had the responsibility of engaging in an institute wide Community of Practice, and encouraging a local community of practice within Faculty departments.

In completing this narrative we ask ourselves what factors can contribute to the development of a sustainable learning culture at Unitec with specific regard to eLearning. The authors identify how a community approach has enabled greater confidence and capability across not only an eLearning community but the wider Unitec Academic staff. In this narrative, we will explore and reflect upon the enablers and barriers experienced in the eLearning roles, the insights, and the implications arising from this model and its efficacy in meeting institutional goals.

The merits of a funded time release as a prerequisite for change of teaching practice are examined, so as to inform recommendations for future initiatives that foster growth in eLearning integration without dedicated funding.

Options are envisioned for the future direction of eLearning capacity development, informed by community participants, literature and the authors' own reflections. These discussions anticipate which measures are sustainable solutions for the future, and consider other measures which could be employed to improve the status quo and ensure a continuing culture of learning and development amongst Unitec teaching staff.

Keywords

eLearning, capacity building, staff development, Community of Practice, tertiary, New Zealand

Background

Unitec is New Zealand's largest Institute of Technology providing vocational and applied professional education from Certificate to Doctoral level. Four campuses in Auckland offer mostly face-to-face courses but with an increasing demand for more flexible delivery of courses.

The institution purchased a Blackboard license in 1998 that was for the majority of courses used as a repository for core documents, and a means for announcement broadcasting. As a result of an LMS (learning management system) evaluation a Moodle pilot was undertaken in three departments in 2009. It was identified that funding saved on proprietary licenses could be better employed for the development of staff capacity in eLearning. The funding of academic staff development by peers was a preferred solution to the contracting of external expertise, as it enabled Unitec to develop internal capability and retain expertise after the implementation phase of the eLearning Strategy and the transition from Blackboard to Moodle.

In 2010, Unitec began implementation of a transformative initiative described as the Living Curriculum. The Living Curriculum has been defined by a number of key principles including complex conversations, curiosity, focus on practice, social constructivism, blended learning experiences, research-informed, interdisciplinary, literacies for lifelong learning and embedded assessment. Underlying this, an additional 'eLearning

Development Strategy' was launched with the aim of developing the capability and capacity of Unitec academic staff in integrating learning technologies in creative and meaningful ways to enhance the learning experience offered to Unitec students. Previously, there had been no strong, sustained institutional commitment to eLearning, and a lack of clarity in strategic direction in this area. (Left, Neal, & Marshall, 2008)

The eLearning Strategy identified ten strategic objectives. These including the up-skilling of all academic staff in eLearning capability, embedding academic literacies in learning environments, and building institutional capability that enables continuing learning development and leadership. It was recognised that in order to fully integrate eLearning into the Living Curricula, institutional capability had to be developed and support structures provided to facilitate development activities. As a vehicle for realising these objectives, the Community of Practice (CoP) model was selected as a potentially empowering approach to building social capital.

Communities of Practice

Wenger (2006) defines communities of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly”. For a community to be defined as a Community of Practice however, Wenger, White & Smith (2009) tells us three critical elements must be present and facilitated. A shared **domain** of interest unites the members of a community of practice and creates the identity of the Community. Members have some aptitude in the domain and the community values its shared social capital. The element of **community** describes the nature of the interactions that define a Community of Practice. Communities of Practice provide an environment for helping, sharing, reflecting, and discussing with peers who have common interests. Finally, **practice** acknowledges the participants of the community as practitioners. Within the community, given time and ongoing interaction, members begin to develop a shared repertoire of practice.

Research identifies a number of essential enablers for the Community of Practice (CoP) model, which could be loosely categorised under the headings of resource (time, finance, committed investment of resources, enabling technologies, engaged sponsorship), community roles (identified champions, energised core, internal leadership, effective facilitation, support and stewardship, voluntary membership and member-driven agenda) and community culture (high expectations, passion, practice focussed, trust, established outcomes and ground rules, value for time, personal touch, fun, celebrating success) (Wenger & Trayner 2010, McDonald 2010). Conversely, threats to the success of a CoP can include lack of time, leader neglect, red tape and ideology, information technology and logistics, command and control, management intervention, inflexibility, de-energising tasks, and a focus on documents and events (Wenger, 2010).

The Community of Practice model was selected with the aim to facilitate staff capacity building partly because a Community of Practice presents the opportunity for the practitioner to adopt the role of both expert and learner within the Community, depending on the recognised skill sets and knowledge of the domain held by the participants. This is of particular significance given the nature of the Living Curricula, and in questioning the traditional role and identity of academic staff as experts rather than life-long learners and collaborative constructors within the domain. “Part of the rationale was the desire to have teachers experience the shift from the acquisition metaphor of learning to the participation metaphor in line with the pedagogic underpinnings discussed previously in relation to their own learning (Sfard, 1998)” Keesing-Styles & Ayres (2011). This approach is also more fitting with ‘Ako’, the Māori concept of teaching and learning as a reciprocal, connected and interrelated process “where the educator is also learning from the student and where educators’ practices are informed by the latest research and are both deliberate and reflective. Ako recognises that the learner and whānau [family community] cannot be separated”. (Ka Hikitia, 2008, p.20)

Additionally, the Community of Practice model is one which is said to offer a “demanding and productive perspective” (Wenger, 2009) from which to view the relationship between community and technology. In understanding how technologies can influence, challenge, foster and be adapted by communities, participants are afforded the opportunity also to experience and reflect on the implications of eLearning as framed within the Living Curriculum.

The tension between a management directed strategy and the organic nature of the Community of Practice model was recognised at the outset of the Strategy implementation, however the potential development opportunities afforded by participation in a CoP, were deemed to have complementary synergies with the key principles of both the Living Curriculum and eLearning Strategies. To counter the tension “every effort was made to allow complete autonomy for each CoP to form its own structure and explicit objectives” (Keesing-Styles & Ayres, 2011).

Funded Roles to support eLearning Strategy rollout

Unitec leadership recognised that the implementation of the eLearning Strategy, Living Curricula and transition from Blackboard to Moodle, would present staff with some confronting change. In acknowledging that change can be a difficult process for academic staff, and that “change brings a certain amount of anxiety and can be very threatening” - (Guskey, 2002, p. 386), it was acknowledged that staff would need time and support to enable an optimal response to the new demands being posed. The success of the eLearning Strategy therefore was dependent on strong support within departments and central support teams, to ensure staff had adequate scaffolding for the change process. Staff would need time “to engage with each other, the technology stewards, and with new technologies” (Keesing-Styles & Ayres, 2011). “Teacher’s capacity for change is frequently compromised by issues of workload, and a significant ongoing challenge was enabling processes whereby workloads could be managed effectively to allow the time and space for conversation and reflection.” (Keesing-Styles & Ayres, 2011 p. 50).

Higgins & Prebble highlight the importance of appropriately resourced central support services in implementing strategic initiatives, identifying that “...they are often the conduit between the institutional strategic direction statements and the actual practices used in faculties, schools and by individual academics. Staff development units supportive of, competent in and knowledgeable about e-learning are more likely to achieve the institutional e-learning goals than those that do not have those characteristics” (2011, p. 39). Unitec leadership recognised the key value of providing well-resourced support services in enabling the pedagogical shift and technical skills acquisition required to successfully implement the eLearning Strategy, as “support allows those engaged in the difficult process of implementation to tolerate the anxiety of occasional failures” (Guskey, 2002, p. 388). It is known that lack of support and training impacts negatively on teacher competence, and consequently, teacher confidence and motivation in integrating the use of ICTs. Conversely, teachers who can confidently use technologies in their practice are likely to understand the benefits and pedagogical potential of ICT integration. (Bingimlas, 2009). Provision of support under the eLearning Strategy involved both centralised and faculty-based resourcing.

The eLearning Strategy was driven through Te Puna Ako, the learning and teaching development centre, using the Community of Practice approach. The Centre provided dedicated expert support for staff in eLearning (including technical support in partnership with IT services), general academic support, and support in the integration of literacies. The Te Puna Ako Learning Centre provided academic support to students.

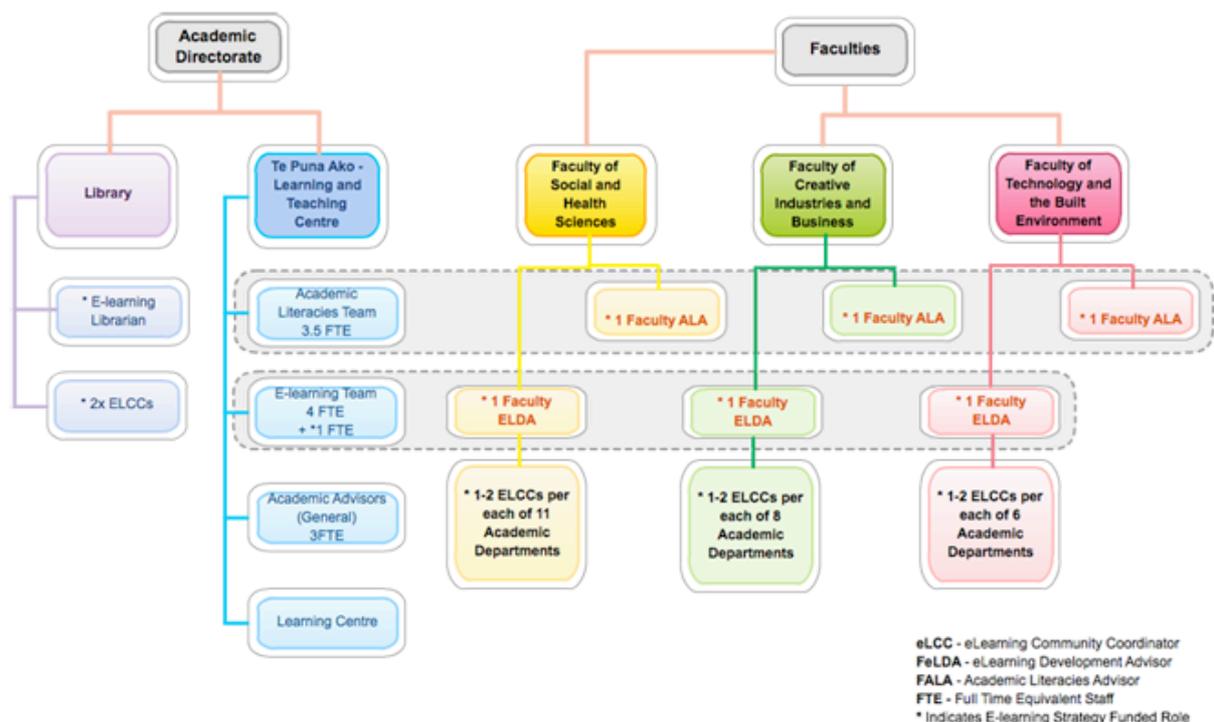


Figure 1: eLearning Staff development support roles for the eLearning Strategy Implementation

The eLearning Strategy has seen the funding of a number of additional, temporary roles to support and foster increased staff capability and capacity in eLearning and associated academic and information literacies. A

supplementary central eLearning team member was employed in Te Puna Ako for the duration of the eLearning Strategy rollout. Additionally, one full time eLearning Librarian role, three full time Faculty eLearning Development Advisors (FeLDAs) and three Faculty Academic Literacy Advisors (FALAs) were recruited to complement the department-based eLearning Community Coordinators (eLCCs) and to work closely with Te Puna Ako.

These additional roles were initially deployed for 18 months to support and foster increased staff capability and capacity in eLearning and associated academic and information literacies. Investment to enable key staff to assist in development of their peers was seen as preferable to the temporary contracting of external expertise to shift content from Blackboard to Moodle. The department-based eLearning Community Coordinator (eLCC) roles were a part-time appointment filled by existing Unitec teaching staff, who were each given (up to 0.2) time release. The eLCCs provided staff development opportunities within their department. It is worth noting that the members of the eLearning community were not voluntary as is recommended in a Community of Practice model, but appointed by the department to represent them. This method of role appointment likely impacted commitment to the role and achievement of associated outcomes.

“The CoP model has been a key vehicle for facilitating collaboration within and across departments, as has the funding of specific ‘technology stewards’ (eLCCs) within the departments. These eLCCs are vital shaping voices in helping keep the focus and purpose of eLearning developments on core pedagogic issues.” Keesing-Styles and Ayres (2011)

The FeLDA’s and FALA’s significantly assisted in liaising with and supporting the various departments in Unitec, and supporting the Communities of Practice which had been and were being established. The initiatives driven by the Library impacted on institution-wide adoption of eLearning, assisting in embedding information literacy through technology, building capacity, and providing access to resources and equipment. A focus on building capability in the institution saw the formation of an Information Literacy Community of Practice that provided participants with a wide range of online and face-to-face activities, the development of a Moodle-based professional development course for Library staff, and significant collaboration between the Library and academic departments.

Community of Practice Implementation

In 2010 official implementation of the CoP approach was launched with a five-day workshop facilitated by Etienne Wenger & Beverly Trayner. The focus was on developing communities of practice in each department at Unitec. This was attended by key stakeholders including the eLearning Community Coordinator (eLCCs) appointed across Unitec, Academic Development management and the eLearning team. The Wenger and Trayner workshop set the stage for the eLearning community in establishing an identity, defining roles and initiating the eLearning Strategy at Unitec.

“The first organised event most of the eLCCs attended was the week-long Community of Practice workshop with Etienne Wenger and Bev Trayner. I cannot emphasise enough how important and meaningful this event was for me. Wenger and Trayner provided the eLCC group with an important introduction into community of practice theory and practice, and eLCCs spent the week conversing, bonding and learning. We entered as individuals and exited as a community. As far as I’m concerned, the organisation of that workshop was a stroke of genius.” (eLCC quoted in Benseman, 2011, p. 8)

The eLCCs had regular informal and formal events together, coffee catch ups and workshops, regular mini symposiums where they shared what they were doing, shared knowledge, and talked together about the challenges they were facing. These opportunities were utilised more by the active eLCCs and those who had time available. Some of the eLCCs then also ran a similar CoP within their department, but tailored to their departmental needs.

To facilitate the CoP a Ning site was established for posting event information, hosting discussions on best practice, and sharing learning. Through the process of developing as a community, the members decided that they would prefer a Moodle course to be used for this, providing the dual purpose of fit for purpose tool and helping them learn more about the new learning management system being adopted and how it may be used with their students. Additionally, the social constructionist approach underpinning the Moodle LMS complemented the transformative practices proposed in the Living Curricula and eLearning Strategies more completely than other options.

The eLearning team modelled the role of “technology stewards” (Wenger, White & Smith, 2009) for the communities, encouraging interdepartmental interactions and sharing of best practice, which led to the FeLDAs and eLCCs becoming technology stewards for their departmental communities. This coaching from the eLearning team assisted eLCCs to support their CoP’s as they were established and shaped to meet each department’s needs. The use of Moodle Docs, Moodle tracker, and forums supplemented the internal support. Participants of the eLearning CoP also contributed in wider Moodle community activities.

Identified Issues

A mid-point survey and end point interviews of eLCCs were conducted in the eLearning Strategy implementation period. Several themes emerged from this data, which are useful in informing an evaluation of the efficacy of the approach taken, and in reflecting on those factors which had impacted on the eLCCs ability to foster staff development. Evidence is also drawn from the Strategy evaluation and evaluation moderation documentation.

Time and Workload

Time and workload were highlighted as the most significant barriers to participation in the eLCC community, and in fostering community and staff development within the Departments. Feedback indicates that for those staff in the eLCC role, the conflict between the responsibilities and priorities of their academic roles (teaching and research), detracted from their ability to invest energy in supporting the CoP process, and offering professional development activities. “I find I am busy and don't put enough time in making events as my main priority is meeting my students needs.” (eLCC). Similarly, “Many staff are keen to learn more and get involved - but the opportunity to do so is limited by staff and eLCC's time, free meeting "slots" and similar resourcing issues”. (eLCC)

Diametrically, the affordance of allocated time to participate in Community activities was reported to be a crucial enabler. “Having an official role and time release within my department allowed me to greatly expand the eLearning support I had previously been unofficially providing to staff in my department. It enabled me to have individual discussions with each of my colleagues and provide them customised support to achieve their eLearning goals.” (eLCC)

Digital Literacy

Digital literacy levels of staff impacted on the uptake of eLearning technologies by staff, and their ability to recognise the pedagogical affordances of these technologies. There were many staff requesting Moodle basic tools workshops who were simply not ready to discuss Living Curriculum characteristics or the eLearning Strategy as they did not feel confident using online technologies. One of the eLearning team member’s research outputs give us this useful insight “The radical pedagogical changes noted in these projects were not because of the technology itself, but rather how it was used, thus pedagogy played an intricate role in the process.” (Narayan, 2011). The Natural Sciences department found the collaborative design and use of a Moodle course template alleviated some of the barriers related to literacy issues for their staff.

Resistance to Community of Practice Approach

A significant issue raised was that the community of practice model was being imposed. In some cases resentment was expressed by staff that they were being forced to apply the CoP label to their existing practices.

“It was decided we would get better buy in if we dropped the title of CoP and just carried on engaging our colleagues with new initiatives as we had done in the past. This continues to work well - a group of like minded people working towards creating a better environment for our students, ourselves and Unitec as a whole.” (eLCC)

This conflict may have impacted on the adoption rates of both the community approach, and the implementation of the eLearning Strategy. “Mainly because of the resistance it made it difficult to engage everyone. Also getting them to take it seriously and not just consider it a “fluffy ideology” imposed on them.” (eLCC).

It is important to note that this ‘compulsory’ approach to CoP participation is contrary to the principles of a Community of Practice as identified by Wenger (2006), and was recognised by Unitec Leadership as a key risk, which required some allowance for mitigation.

“The tension of having an institutional strategy to develop organic CoPs was acknowledged as potentially conflicting, although every effort was made to allow complete autonomy for each CoP to form its own structure and explicit objectives.” (Keesing-Styles & Ayres, 2011)

The impending organisational deadlines around the LMS transition and departmental accountability to these targets also appeared to impact negatively on the staff development process. “I can't get 10 minutes to talk about our plans in staff meetings....everyone is panicking about templates and course shells. I want to talk about my plan and planning strategy, not templates and shells" (eLCC).

Support

Midpoint and endpoint feedback accorded with the Unitec leadership's acknowledgement that support systems would be crucial to the implementation of the eLearning Strategy. From the eLCC perspective particularly, the value of local (within Departments) and central support services, and conversely, the detrimental impact of a lack of support were perceived as crucial determiners in enabling both community and staff development to flourish.

Central Support

The integral role Te Puna Ako played in staff development was frequently recognised, both for the provision of practical training and advice, and for the interpersonal support and connections. The support activities offered by Te Puna Ako were highly valued, with one on one training and mentoring rated by eLCCs as the most useful support received. "I've found the TPA [Te Puna Ako] support to be great throughout, whether through formal training or informal assistance and advice" (eLCC). Additionally, support from the central Te Puna Ako eLearning team was appreciated when eLCCs anticipated resistance within their departmental community. "A member from TPA attended the day long workshop and supported our efforts. This was great as we met significant resistance to the initiative" (eLCC).

The value of face-to-face communication with Te Puna Ako was also highlighted. “TPA staff are our hub to go to. It is excellent to be able to drop in anytime and have face to face contact" (eLCC). eLCCs ranked the Te Puna Ako mini symposiums in particular as being ‘highly useful’ in supporting the eLCC role. “I learnt a lot, met so many people, very friendly and approachable lot at TPA, exchange of experiences, friendly atmosphere, love the homemade cakes” (eLCC). Activities facilitated through the central support teams provided important opportunities for sharing knowledge and keeping momentum. Celebration of success with peers in the wider community was valued.

“the eLearning communities’ mini symposiums were great as you got to see how web 2.0 tools could be utilised in teaching in a way that I could understand and hear staff talking about successes they were having, so I could then see scope for being innovative and creative in teaching, and TPA provided a great space for that to happen with an inclusive open flow through feeling about it”. (eLCC)

Many of the eLCCs requested more opportunities to share best practice in the existing format of TPA sponsored mini symposiums, though equally there was a desire for tools based workshops, highlighting the need to consider digital literacy levels for these key staff. “I have found that when I need to do a specific thing in eLearning that specific consultation is very helpful.” (eLCC)

The importance of Just-In-Time, needs appropriate training was a common theme, and the availability of responsive training was identified by eLCCs as being very important in preparing eLCCs to be responsive to their departmental communities.

"I will be attending a course facilitated by TPA... and the reason I signed up is because the course tools are based around the same tools I have recently introduced to my group. I am hoping [to gain] a better insight as to how to best manage these tools and most importantly how to keep them relevant and stimulating during the year." (eLCC)

“As my main role is as a Support person. I will try to make more events, though often I find that not all the information I find is relevant as of right now. But I do find when I do get a specific need I can contact the eLCCs and someone is always keen to help.”

In supporting their own departmental communities, the eLCC's reported that workshops were the most commonly utilised vehicle for professional development, though one on one support and formal meetings were also commonly employed.

"We now have Moodle up and running and we have recently introduced other tools that we launch from Moodle. Staff response has been good and what I have noticed is that they buy-in to these tools when they are ready. So it is an ongoing project but in general 70% of staff are using Moodle but at different levels."

With the knowledge that there was central support behind them, the vast majority (95%) of eLCCs were confident in running staff development events for their department.

Local Support

It was concerning that one quarter of the eLCCs felt they received 'little or no support' from within their department, and only 40 per cent of respondents felt they were well supported by their department. The majority met with their Head of Department monthly or less than monthly, and were more likely to met with Te Puna Ako staff. One eLCC wrote that "without active support and championing within a Department's management and leadership structure it is difficult to get traction."

Strong local support greatly enhances the chances of successful staff development. In the Department of Languages there was strong leadership support, evident in the provision of additional, department funded e-learning leadership roles to support the work of the eLCCs. This department had very active eLCCs who took were proactive in enhancing their own capability and sharing their learning and experiences, in the Department CoP and National Moodle Moot for example. There was recognition of successes within the department and ongoing dissemination of the learned expertise across the department. Many staff development activities were initiated in this department, including in-depth forum conversations, 'social' eLearning events and a variety of workshops. The development of a skillset checklist enabled them to identify not only the skills they deemed necessary for teaching languages but to work to address any gaps. The additional development of a course evaluation tool helped the teachers identify further development opportunities within their programmes. This department integrated a number of additional web 2.0 technologies and worked with the eLearning team to identify discipline specific Moodle modules and plugins that supported their students to meet learning outcomes.

Role Ambiguity

A lack of clarity of the eLearning roles may have impacted on their efficacy and on the way in which the roles were received and perceived by other staff. This ambiguity appears to have resulted in part from the tension between the organic and dynamic nature of roles within a CoP, and the management and peer expectations of a paid role in achieving specific outcomes in a given timeframe.

Roles within a Community of Practice are by necessity fluid, allowing for participants to in turn offer their unique perspectives, experiences and expertise. Peripheral participants in this model may remain peripheral, or, in developing their identities within the community, assume active core roles. Scope exists within the CoP model to appreciate the unique contributions made by different practitioners within the domain. The expected outputs required of the eLCCs, FeLDAs and central eLearning staff under the Strategy however, may have been at odds with their roles as CoP participants and stewards.

For some staff, the eLearning Strategy was seen as revolving around the shift from Blackboard to Moodle. During the initial eLCC workshop eLCCs defined their role, asserting that the role was not to provide technical support. However, within their departments, several eLCCs stated that they struggled to divorce themselves from the responsibilities and the peer perception of a technical-help role. The FeLDAs and eLearning team members found similar issues in terms of staff role perception. It could be surmised that the eLCCs had an advantage in this regard in that they were already recognised among their peers as being subject matter experts and teachers within their discipline.

Although issues around role ambiguity and perception were often problematic, the undefined nature of the FeLDA and eLCC roles created space for tailored response to the specific and immediate needs of each Department and Faculty. Individuals with eLearning roles approached their local communities in accord with the demands of those communities. Sometimes the drivers were somewhat perfunctory or motivated by urgency (for example 'shifting a course' between LMSs) rather than inspired by pedagogical shifts and a focus on staff development. However, traction was made in all Departments and Faculties towards achieving elements of the eLearning Strategy, even if to the detriment of the Community of Practice model.

Accounting and Finance setup a department Community of Practice Moodle page to communicate events and share what they were learning. They designed their own theme that then led on to use of the theme for the courses they offered to students too. The pictures they chose for their theme are of their building and the surrounding area where there are Pukeko (native birds) and pohutukawa trees (native trees). This theme development created more buy-in to the eLearning Strategy and helped build a unique sense of identity. They used “Poll Everywhere” displayed in a course block to focus their community on trying new things. The approach this eLCC took to support his department CoP developed not only his peers eLearning skills, but helped build their confidence and increased their sense of support as learners.

Reflections on Community

The actualisation of a true Community of Practice may not have been realised in the eLearning implementation period. However, a community approach to adapting to the LMS migration and eLearning Strategy was certainly a defining characteristic of the process, and a catalyst for ‘shift’ in pedagogy, and staff development initiatives. “Sharing practice is more useful than sharing/ discussing academic position” (eLCC). While feedback on the efficacy of the Community of Practice model was mixed, there is evidence that the approach taken by Unitec had very positive outcomes in empowering staff initiatives, and providing the basis for a collaborative approach to staff development.

“My involvement in the Unitec eLearning Community of Practice was hugely beneficial to me, impacting my role both within my own department and across the institution as a whole.... Being part of a wider community exposed me to a range of other Unitec staff with an interest in eLearning. I was able to share my ideas with others from different disciplines and to adopt ideas used elsewhere to good effect. I have certainly learned a lot from the experience and continue to benefit from a number of ongoing professional relationships formed through this community.”
(eLCC)

While some staff with eLearning roles reported that the central CoP was more effective than their local departmental CoPs, others reported that they found their immediate community networks, or interactions with sub-clusters of the central CoP, to be more beneficial than the broad communities of practice. An eLCC said “the community within my department was much more useful for me than the Unitec wide community, as I know the people”. The eLCCs located in one Faculty felt they were geographically remote from the central support infrastructure so they informally developed into a small community of practice, sharing their different skills, workloads and learning experiences.

Over the Strategy period, there was a visible shift in focus from Moodle tools to discussions around pedagogy. This was evidenced in eLCCs presentations at community workshops and mini symposiums for example. The scope of interest broadened to the integration of other tools with the Moodle platform as staff, delved into eportfolios, use of twitter for collaboration and introducing RSS feeds to encourage currency within the discipline in Moodle learning spaces for example. The exploration of iPads as a teaching and learning tool grew as did educational gaming and digital storytelling. There were more Web 2.0 technologies integrated with Moodle and more complex use of core Moodle tools and investigations into their application to learning. This experimentation improved the support the eLCCs could offer staff across all levels of digital literacy.

Some of those in eLearning roles have exponentially increased in capability and confidence as a result of the funded time release. The growing confidence and capabilities staff have in integrating eLearning has resulted in eLCCs presenting at institute internal events, national and international conferences, as well as online conferences. Unitec organised and hosted the International Conference on eLearning Futures in 2011 as well as co-hosting with Moodle Partner HRDNZ the first MoodleMoot in Auckland in the same year.

The Community approach as a vehicle for staff development, and a means of facing institutional change enabled participants to own part of the vision of the eLearning Strategy, and development of eLearning use in the institution, as well as providing a forum for challenging some of the Strategy’s goals. Recognition needs to be awarded to the departments who have - with the support of their eLCCs and FeLDAs - developed successful communities where sharing of best practice and continuing focus on staff development was becoming a norm.

“The most effective e-learning programmes tend to occur where a whole programme team makes a commitment to develop and deliver their courses to a shared set of guidelines on service and standards’ . (Ministry of Education, 2007c, p. 22)” cited in Keesing-Styles & Ayres (2011, p. 49).

Where to from here?

The change from Blackboard to Moodle 1.9 is now complete. The more active members of the Community of Practice are influencing the current Moodle 2.2 upgrade project scheduled for July 2012, with their input leading to customisation, enabling of features, repositories and portfolio selections, and improvements in our processes.

The Faculty eLearning Development Advisor positions have been extended to maintain momentum in embedding eLearning into teaching practice. A number of Departments have self-funded time release for key staff to continue developing their peers. Additional departmental positions have been created out of a deeper understanding of the value in supporting staff to embrace eLearning.

An eLCC initiated an institution-wide mobile technologies Community of Practice which Unitec launched in 2012, supporting exploration into the potential integration of iPads and similar devices in learning and teaching. The key facilitators of this community are not allocated any funding or time release for their contributions, and participation in the community is entirely voluntary. Participants are actively involved in the community activities because of a shared interest in investigating the potential of new technologies in learning and teaching.

Since the conclusion of the initial eLearning Strategy implementation phase, tailored communities of practice have been emerging in response to staff interests and skills, knowledge and experiences acquired over the past two years. These communities are evidence of an institutional shift in approaches to staff development, and have empowered teaching staff to initiate their own fora for exploring interest topics. It appears that true Communities of Practice are now developing in the wake of the eLearning Strategy, and that the emergence of these communities has been facilitated by the opportunities afforded by funded time release for staff development and community participation.

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