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Conferencing and workshops: a blend for staff development

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Abstract: several hundred staff participated in a programme set up to support the Open University's mainstreaming of online teaching. One particular concern was how the programme would avoid being seen as a top–down imposition in areas of controversial change such as the move towards e-tutoring. To meet this, the programme set out to facilitate university-wide sharing of experience and practices across diverse groups of academic and learning-support staff while remaining sensitive to local needs in different parts of the organization. As part of this process, about 80 staff participated in online conferencing blended with workshops, in some cases gaining almost their first experience of online discussion. The paper draws on quantitative and qualitative data to illustrate some of the ways in which such discussion can facilitate staff development in areas of profound change.

Reaching the mainstream

The e-learning innovators and early adopters have – without waiting for staff development – been innovating and adopting for many years. They have created online courses with at times spectacular numbers of students, particularly in disciplines such as ICT (for example, Weller 1999). But how do staff developers help to extend e-learning beyond these pockets of innovation and into the mainstream, crossing what Moore (1991) vividly described as a 'chasm' between visionaries and pragmatists? On the pragmatic side of this divide are rather different colleagues, including those whom Ellis and Phelps characterize as 'less technologically literate' (2000: 26).

Laurillard argues (2002: 226) that '[f]amiliarity with the key technologies is a pre-requisite for academics to think through how to use them in courses'. How will staff acquire this familiarity and technological literacy? One approach would be for them to experience how it feels to be an e-learner (Fitzgibbon and Jones 2004: 28; Jamieson 2004: 23), or at the least to engage in some form of online professional development. This also offers logistical advantages: many staff suffer time-poverty (for example, Smith and Oliver 2000: 135), a situation for which the flexibility of online delivery is well suited.

But although online staff development appears to have a strong rationale, there are anecdotal reports that it is not well embedded, in addition to reported evidence such as Beetham and Bailey (2002: 171) on low take-up of online materials, and Shephard et al. (2003: 245) on 'limited enthusiasm' for online discussion. The present paper reports on a programme that included a blend of online discussion and workshops. About 80 Open University staff took part in this blended component, in some cases gaining almost their first experience of online discussion and thus starting to acquire 'literacy' in a key technology.

How this component was designed is one of the subjects in this paper, which draws on quantitative data from the evaluation and looks at lessons that can be learned for successful implementation. The paper also draws on evidence from the text of online messages, and suggests that conferencing is particularly suited to staff development in areas such as learning technologies, which 'threaten to change us, as learners and teachers, as well as promising to help us' (Beetham and Bailey 2002: 165).

The paper opens up, and reports some progress with, other long-standing questions. For example, if colleagues are to develop their teaching, who should help them? Hanrahan et al. (2001) argue that, rather than being 'developed' through centralized

programmes, colleagues need local support that runs with the grain of existing discipline-based structures. Support of that kind may be more palatable, especially for experienced and long-serving colleagues who are being asked or pressured to change professional practices they have built up over many years, and who may not welcome 'staff development'. This is consistent with Laurillard's point that the 'resistance of academics to educational courses is remarkable for a profession that lives by them' (2002: 226).

In similar vein, Collis and Moonen warn that 'top–down change is notoriously difficult to carry out in university contexts, so the balance between sufficient administrative stimulation and too much for academic acceptance is a delicate one' (2001: 61). Local and individual support may be more acceptable therefore. But though it is often appreciated by those who receive it, individual support is costly to implement across a large institution, as a number of authors have pointed out (for example, Slay 1999; Kirkpatrick 2001: 174). It can also result in fragmentation, and the entrenching of almost arbitrary local differences.

These issues – around pedagogy and technology, and the tension between embedded local help and a central programme that some may resist as a top–down imposition – are part of the landscape within which the programme, Introducing Teaching and Learning Online, reached several hundred Open University staff. The next part of the paper sets out how the programme team, led by the author of this paper, developed strategies to negotiate these issues and tensions. The strategies were rooted in the team's varied experience: some members were academics with experience of designing and presenting online courses, some were web applications-developers, others provided administrative support. And although for convenience they will at times be referred to as 'staff developers', staff development formed only part of their professional role.

Strategy: how central, how local?

The danger of reinventing the wheel has been well aired, to the point that it long ago became a cliché. Lessons must indeed be learned and models transferred from one context to another, yet practices do not always travel easily across campus. For the staff developers designing ITLO (Introducing Teaching and Learning Online), this issue involved significant decisions. How far could and should we capture exemplars from one part of the university and present them to other areas for adoption? How far should we bring together, in workshops or online discussions, staff from a range of faculties for knowledge-sharing?

That was undoubtedly our ambition – so as to reduce parochialism and wheel-reinvention – but we needed to avoid catapulting into one faculty an inappropriate model from the other side of campus. Some staff recognized this danger too, clearly seeing that for their discipline – in the humanities or health care, for example – it would usually be unwise to import unchanged a model from, say, a course about ICT.

We could try to promote general principles of e-learning pedagogy for others to apply in their own context, and that was part of our approach. But without some local engagement, staff development has limited effectiveness. As Hanrahan et al. conclude, 'the literature reviewing traditional approaches seems to suggest that professional development that is supported at the local level by staff with the appropriate background and discipline-based knowledge is likely to be more relevant and productive than centralized, decontextualized programmes' (2001: 131).

With decontextualization comes another danger for staff developers, that of being seen as the university's 'agent', to use Jamieson's term (2004: 27). He contrasts that with the approach adopted for a staff-development programme at Monash University, where the aim was to 'develop a critical awareness of the complexity of online learning'. For the ITLO team, being seen as uncritically promoting online learning was a particular risk with a university e-learning strategy that implied large-scale and at times controversial change. Yet we did not have time to work for lengthy periods within the local context alongside the numerous course teams. These are the teams, made up of discipline-based academics and support staff, who create teaching materials in print, webpages and other media, but who do not generally meet students.

We moved in two ways to resolve the central–local tension. First, we identified a wide-ranging issue that was a common concern for many course teams and other internal staff. The issue related to the role of the university's tutors, who engage directly with individual students, mark their assignments, organize tutorials, and help to mediate the distance-teaching materials that have been produced by central course teams. How would tutors and their students react if the tutoring was shifted from face-to-face to online delivery in computer conferences? We were able to harness this locally-felt concern as a common starting-point for workshops and discussions that then led into pedagogy, into student and tutor workload, and into the changing relationships between key groups of staff who in diverse ways deliver teaching.

Strategy: participants who influence others

The second part of the central–local balance relates to the issue of which staff – both academic and support – would participate in the ITLO programme. We decided to focus on staff who met one or more of the following criteria: they expressed an interest or need in relation to e-teaching and e-learning; they had experience already and were willing to share it; and/or they occupied important though not necessarily senior positions in course teams and elsewhere and could influence the local take-up of e-learning. Many of them would not be new to the university, and the programme would not be linked to probation. It would be optional: we invited them and many accepted. One of the key features of most participants, then, was that they were volunteers.

Collis and Moonen argue that working with volunteers misses 'the hard core of resistance that is confronted when an entire faculty must change' (2001: 61). But we took a different line, arguing that the Open University's team-based approach to materials-creation gave greater flexibility in two ways. First, if we worked with key individuals, they could develop online components to sit alongside more traditional media within the overall teaching package for their course. Second, these volunteers would be in a position to influence other people in their team in the direction of e-learning. This gradualist approach may appear to target what have often been called 'the usual suspects' (for example, quoted in Smith and Oliver 2000: 134), but in our analysis it meshed with the local structure and could lead to significant and embedded change.

Applying our criteria stated above, we identified prospective participants in many of the categories of staff who contribute to the university's teaching, including:

- media staff – who work with teams of academics to develop and produce teaching packages;

- course managers who work with the teams to facilitate course creation and production in a way consistent with schedules, costings and new developments and strategies within the university;

- academic staff, who originate the teaching materials but in general do not directly tutor students;

- other academics responsible for line-managing the tutors who interact personally and directly with students.

The changing local context

For a university with well over 150,000 students, more than 4,000 internal staff and about 7,500 part-time tutors, the mainstreaming of e-learning required changes on a large scale. As in other institutions, students were increasingly being offered administrative and study support online. Some courses were being developed with e-tutorials as central to their design, and the university was implementing a review of the somewhat diffuse elements then constituting its VLE. Central funding was provided for new online courses to act as exemplars, for software to support e-learning, and for staff-development initiatives including the one reported in this paper. Introducing Teaching and Learning Online thus had a fair wind behind it, it had funding, and it had the high-level support that many authors see as important for success (for example, Smith and Oliver 2000: 137). The pace of change was quickening, and ITLO was not isolated: it was setting out in company with other e-learning initiatives and, like McNaught (2002: 123), had a 'sense of gathering momentum'.

Does it have to be online?

With a staff-development programme called Introducing Teaching and Learning Online, it would be perverse, even defeatist, to rely solely on workshops and other face-to-face events. It was essential therefore to deliver at least part of ITLO online. This orientation has distinguished underpinnings: Biggs' position (2003: 27, for example) implies that staff-development activities should align with the intended outcomes. Kolb's arguments (for example, 1983) suggest that, to appreciate the potential of the technologies, staff would need to experience them for themselves and reflect on these experiences before planning how to teach.

This is consistent with the argument from Fitzgibbon and Jones already referred to (2004: 28), namely that staff need to experience something of how it feels to be a student. It is also aligned with MacKenzie and Staley's design that seeks 'to persuade more staff to embed learning technology in the curriculum' by encouraging them to use online materials for their professional development (2000: 42).

There were additional strong arguments for ITLO to use online delivery, and specifically asynchronous conferencing. It could be attractive for time-poor individuals to conference at times that suited them. Further, of the e-learning technologies that the university was adopting, online conferencing was one of the least familiar and most contentious.

In addition, conferencing put into practice one of the core beliefs of the staff developers involved, that colleagues would benefit from building on and sharing their own values and experience. This broadly constructivist position has been advocated by a number of authors, including Ferman. She was writing about

academic staff, and we argued it was equally true of learning-support staff: 'it is important to acknowledge that academics possess varied knowledge bases and that one valuable source for informing the design of creative and effective programmes of professional development may be found in the insights, experiences and knowledge of the academics themselves' (Ferman 2002: 146).

Kirkpatrick has argued on similar lines, referring to a programme at Charles Sturt University: 'It is essential to make academics' values, attitudes and responses to change visible if real cultural change is to occur' (2001: 175). It remained to be seen how far our target participants would be willing to make their 'values, attitudes and responses' visible by posting online messages, in what for some would be an unfamiliar medium, to colleagues with whom they would be conferencing only briefly. But it seemed important to try.

In addition to promoting group discussion, the programme developed small chunks of individualized learning material. These were provided on a website that offered innovative functionality to promote just-in-time engagement, and will be the subject of a separate paper.

A role for face-to-face events?

Though the ITLO programme had an underpinning rationale for online conferencing, one of its central planks remained workshops and other face-to-face events. Why? The principal reason was that, unlike online conferencing, face-to-face events were already embedded in staff-development practices at the Open University as in many other institutions. They were at least familiar, and workshops can be popular. Ferman, for example, reports a study in which she asked a group of Australian academics to identify and rank professional-development activities: '[t]he "surprise" finding was the valuing by participants of workshops', particularly among less experienced staff (2002: 152).

The ITLO team provided roughly thirty face-to-face events. Some were 'institutional workshops' in Oliver and Dempster's categorization (2002: n.p.), lasting two hours or more, while others were short discussions and presentations designed to raise awareness. In total, over 400 staff participated in face-to-face events across the two years of the programme. Within a large institution where staff development and professional updating are widely dispersed, this number for a single programme is high. ITLO gained leverage by working with key staff who could be expected to go back to their teaching teams and influence the design of their course as a whole: the course academic leaders who participated, for instance, would be potentially influential in that way. The 90 course managers – over half the university's total – would provide impetus and support in the same direction.

But though we wished to harness the embeddedness of workshops, we did not wish to leave staff-development practices at the Open University as we found them. Indeed we hoped to embed a new practice of staff development, combining the familiar workshop with the less familiar online discussion. We therefore included within the programme six events where online discussion was followed by two-hour workshops, and it is this blended approach that is the focus of the remainder of the paper.

The blend

The blended events had titles such as 'Online tutoring: a scenario-based exercise' and 'Online tutoring: managing (everyone's) expectations'. Numbers of participants for each one were limited to sixteen, and workshops usually started with a 20-minute introduction, then a small-group task such as designing an e-learning component for a fictitious course, or drawing up guidelines on managing time online.

In most of these events the participants included academic and support staff drawn widely from across the university. This is in line with Fitzgibbon and Jones' report (2004: 33) that, at the time of their writing, they had not split staff into 'single-interest' groups. Participation-rates at the workshops were around 90 per cent: once staff had accepted an invitation, and received reminder emails, it was rare for them not to attend.

Each workshop was preceded by about two weeks of online discussion, where participants started to explore issues that would be the subject of the forthcoming workshop. Participants discussed how part-time tutors could develop new skills for e-tutoring, for example, or the way e-tutorials were currently being used in, say, a course in the Business School.

These discussions were moderated by an ITLO team member who was an experienced online facilitator and would also lead the workshop. This moderation was almost certainly necessary to sustain discussion among groups of up to sixteen staff – many of whom did not know each other, who had differing job-roles in diverse areas of a large organization, and who were coming together briefly online and in a workshop before dispersing. Moderation also enabled the workshop-leader to begin to get to know the participants, to gauge their special interests and levels of experience, to prepare the ground for the workshop and, crucially, to learn from them what was going on elsewhere – and feed this back to the next group of staff in a later online discussion.

We copied quotations from the online messages and then presented these on slides for discussion in the workshops. For example, we re-used the following from one of the messages, as it captured an issue for many staff: 'My main concern at the moment is how to give effective guidance and support to [part-time tutors] so that they are not overwhelmed by their task, and they can give the best support to students'.

This practice of using quotations had four purposes: to validate the online discussion, perhaps even retrospectively reward participation; to capture some of the insights and stories and highlight them in a fresh medium, i.e. face to face; to reinforce and disseminate the learning through further discussion; and to ensure some alignment between issues that participants were raising in the discussion and the way in which we would introduce the topic for the subsequent workshop.

The boundary between online and face-to-face discussion was further reduced when rapporteurs during the actual workshops were supplied with laptops. They used these to capture summaries of the small-group discussions and load them as additional messages to the online threads. This had a practical benefit in that it allowed a number of small groups to access the online discussion area simultaneously during the workshop. It was then easy for the workshop leader to project these messages to a screen that the complete group could see and discuss during the plenary. This was physically more convenient than having a number of small groups trying to write their key points onto one electronic whiteboard. It was also interesting choreographically in blurring the boundary still further between

online and face-to-face modes, with the former acting as an almost simultaneous capturing of the latter.

Evaluating the conferences/workshops

About 80 staff took part in the blend of online conferencing plus face-to-face workshop. Their experiences were evaluated using anonymous feedback sheets containing thirteen questions, which participants completed in the final ten minutes of each workshop. The questions gathered data about how far, if at all, participants had taken part in the online preparation, and about their reactions to it. Data were also gathered about their prior experience of online conferencing, and about their satisfaction ratings for both the online and face-to-face elements. Because the feedback sheets were collected at the end of each workshop, the response rates were high – above 90 per cent in all cases.

Findings about the blended delivery

Participants were asked to estimate the total number of conference messages they had posted <u>before</u> beginning the programme (Table 1), and this number was taken as a proxy for their previous experience of online conferencing in general. However, it was not assumed that high numbers invariably equated to being an 'expert': staff may need to mature their skills over time, experiencing conferencing on a range of subjects and with a range of people.

Table 1: Respondents' previous conferencing experience (self-estimate of number of conference messages each individual had sent before starting ITLO's online discussion)

Messages sent <u>before</u> ITLO	0–9	10–20	21–40	41–80	81–100	>100
Respondents	7	8	5	9	3	41

<u>n</u> = 73

Table 1 indicates that participants differed widely in the number of conference messages they had sent before starting ITLO. In some cases the difference was wider than shown here: some of the respondents selecting 'more than 100' added that they had sent many hundreds, even thousands of messages. And since staff with widely differing levels of experience came together in the same online group, there was an opportunity for inexperienced staff to learn from more experienced colleagues.

Of course, such benefits could not accrue unless respondents had actually taken part in the online discussion. They were asked to estimate the amount of time they had spent in the two weeks of online discussion leading up to the workshop (Table 2).

Table 2: Respondents' estimate of their time spent in reading/sending messages in ITLO's online discussion

Time spent	none	< 5 mins	5–15 mins	16–29 mins	30–60 mins	1–2 hours
Respondents	4	8	8	15	23	16

<u>n</u> = 74

Overall the level of participation was considered encouraging: nearly all respondents had been willing to at least log on to the discussion in the previous two weeks. For many award-bearing courses, this percentage of logging on would be considered creditable in the first two weeks.

Among those who logged on, over half reported spending at least thirty minutes in reading/sending messages before their two-hour face-to-face workshop. Sixteen respondents (one-fifth) reported that they had spent between one and two hours in conferencing, i.e. at least half as long as they would spend in the workshop.

The evaluation form also asked participants to indicate how far they agreed with statements about the online discussion and its implementation (Table 3).

Table 3: Respondents' attitudes to the online element and its implementation

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1: 'I'd have preferred a face-to-face event that did not include online preparation'	2	11	35	22
2: 'I didn't mind receiving emails encouraging me to participate online'	38	33	1	–
3: 'Sending a message to the ITLO discussion area required a great deal of confidence'	1	18	31	23

n = 73; not all respondents gave a rating for each statement.

Statement 1: the responses here were regarded as supporting the team's strategy of attempting to blend online and face-to-face staff development (and the satisfaction ratings reported in Table 4 are broadly consistent with this).

Statement 2: one of the concerns of the team had been whether prospective participants would tolerate emails encouraging them to take part in the online discussion. The responses to Statement 2 allayed these concerns. The reminder emails had been compiled 'by hand'; for future programmes it would obviously be desirable if this process were automated.

Statement 3: the responses here suggested that lack of confidence may have been an issue for about one-quarter of the respondents. This would need further enquiry, for example into a possible link between lack of confidence and low levels of previous experience as reported in Table 1. Even experienced participants, however, can take time to feel confident in a new online group. The effect of this could apply particularly in programmes such as ITLO, where online discussion lasted for no more than two weeks.

As Table 4 indicates, most participants rated both the online discussions and the face-to-face workshops as 'fairly' or 'very' interesting and 'fairly' or 'very' relevant, but with higher ratings for the face-to-face element. A number of factors might help explain the lower rating for the online element. For example, four respondents did not visit the conferencing at all, and eight spent less than five minutes on it (Table 2), whereas all respondents spent two hours in the workshops.

Table 4: Satisfaction ratings (interest and relevance) for the ITLO online discussions and face-to-face workshops

	[did not participate online]	Not at all [interesting] [relevant]	Not very [interesting] [relevant]	Fairly [interesting] [relevant]	Very [interesting] [relevant]
Online interesting?	[4]	–	3	45	20
Online relevant to current/future work?	[4]	–	6	36	26
Face-to-face interesting?	–	1	1	29	41
Face-to-face relevant to current/future work?	–	–	3	28	41

n = 72

Evidence from the messages

The content of the messages gives evidence of participants learning and sharing. For example, one participant commented when she came back to the conference after an absence: 'Well, for the first time ever, I've felt electronically overwhelmed! I thought I'd better check the messages here before tomorrow and expected just a few unread messages […] How wrong I was!'

She continued: 'Should have realized it wouldn't be quiet for long […] I now know what it feels like for someone unfamiliar with this form of communication to come in and be faced by a barrage of unread messages – where to start?' Students' feelings of being overwhelmed in online conferences are already well documented, but the experiential dimension for that participant illustrates one of the benefits gained when staff engage directly in conferencing.

In another discussion, participants exchanged views about how far students should support each other online and how far they could reasonably expect support from their tutor, an important issue about both workload and pedagogy. One person suggested a ratio of 10:90 as the long-term ideal – with the ten per cent being the tutor's input. This was picked up by a participant from a faculty that was literally and metaphorically on the other side of campus: 'I hadn't come across the 10/90 recommendation before though. That's really useful.'

Both participants had some experience of conferencing and could be expected to apply the recommendation judiciously: it was understood that the ratio would vary depending on the students' experience, level, stage in the course and so on. Nevertheless exchanges of this kind seem to illustrate a form of learning that justified the cross-campus design of the conference/workshop blend, which is consistent with Jamieson, for example (2004: 25).

The issue of workload in e-tutorials generated many messages. It went to the heart of concerns about the implementation of e-learning, about possible changes to models of learning and pedagogy, and indeed about whether e-tutoring offered an opportunity or a threat to the university's mission of supporting its learners. While staff were exploring their own and colleagues' concerns and interests, they were also familiarizing themselves with the medium. This model appears to meet Ellis and Phelps' concerns that there is a 'fine balance between exposing staff to technological

possibilities and overwhelming them with technology <u>which they do not immediately use</u>' (2000: 43; my italics).

Discussion

When they were offered online conferencing as preparation for a culminating face-to-face workshop, nearly all staff logged on, with most rating the online element as fairly or very interesting and relevant to their current or future work. Of those who logged on, over half reported spending at least half an hour on the conferencing. For one-fifth of respondents, the online discussion substantially increased the duration of their overall participation in the programme: they read/sent messages for at least an hour in the period before their two-hour workshop.

Conferencing offered experiential learning, particularly important for those with little or no experience in the medium. Equally significantly, for staff who had already acquired some experience in e-learning, taking part in the conferences enabled them to share what they already knew from their own contexts. Staff were enabled to ask questions of people they had not previously met, and the moderator encouraged them to draw on their existing knowledge to explore how the university's teaching might be developed to accommodate e-learning, particularly e-tutorials. The slow pace of conferencing as a medium appeared to be well suited to this process. It allowed a diversity of positions to emerge over the two weeks, adding to the knowledge both of the participants and of the team, and helping to inform part of the content of the programme.

These patterns of online activity are consistent with constructivism – which, as Laurillard observes, is a 'broad church' (2002: 67). For the ITLO participants, the conferencing directly illustrated, and provided experience of, constructivism in action. One of the strengths of this approach was that it gave voice to staff's 'values, attitudes and responses', to use a phrase from Kirkpatrick quoted earlier (2001: 175). To that list could be added a fourth dimension – staff's <u>knowledge</u>. When staff are drawn together from across a large and complex organization, it is likely that many of them will have expert knowledge of some part of the 'business', and the ITLO discussion allowed this knowledge to surface.

The evaluation suggests that, if conferencing is used in this fashion, it enables two-way learning between the programme team and participants. This increases the chance that the programme will locate itself among staff's professional concerns, and so avoid being seen as, in McNaught's phrase, 'too driven by central policy' (2002: 122). This danger – alluded to earlier – seems to have been avoided by ITLO: the programme attracted a high number of volunteer participants, even though the team members needed to be honest that they were supporting the mainstreaming of e-learning, and indeed were enthusiasts from their own e-teaching and conferencing work.

The responses from about one-quarter of the participants suggested that lack of confidence in sending messages may have been an issue. Further research would be useful to see whether this constraint could be reduced, particularly where – as in this programme – group members hardly had time to get to know each other.

Conclusion

Shephard <u>et al.</u> (2003: 246), writing of Southampton University's Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice, recognized that achieving the aims of that

programme would depend on 'a wide range of interacting activity at the university'. Similarly at the Open University, the ITLO programme was helped by the fact that numerous initiatives were interacting, both flowing on the e-learning tide and helping to give it force. ITLO caught the tide, and it caught and made use of a big issue about e-tutorials at a time of uncertainty among both academic and learning-support staff. Its experience suggests that the constructivist potential of online discussion is well suited to staff development in areas such as e-learning that generate controversy and may require profound change.

Less abstractly, the data from the evaluation above suggest certain pointers for engaging staff in online discussion: run the discussion for a limited period – for example, two weeks; give it a purpose such as preparation for a forthcoming face-to-face event; moderate it, and use email to remind staff to participate; capture stories and ideas from the conference and use quotations in the workshop; look for ways to blur the distinction between the online and face-to-face modes – for example, with laptops in the workshop. And above all, keep close to colleagues' interests and concerns by learning from and building on the knowledge and experience that they surface during the online discussion.

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