Learning2014: An institution-wide strategy to encourage innovation in teaching and learning

Institution & Institutional Context

Learning2014 was an institution-wide strategy to support the transition of learning to incorporate the best of online and the best of face-to-face learning activities and resources. It was prompted by the once-in-a-generation investment in new buildings that initiated a major upgrade to the university's teaching spaces. These spaces were purpose-built to support the UTS approach to practice-oriented education that ensures students graduate with industry-relevant experience and exposure to cutting-edge technology in order to develop knowledge and skills valued by employers. The new teaching spaces were created so students could participate in high quality face-to–face experiences that encourages active, collaborative learning experiences. While many classes will continue to feature more interactive and engaging lectures, students are also learning in groups using teacher-created or open education resources.

Keywords and OEP themes

Institutional Strategy; Higher Education; Open Education; Active Learning; Student Participation; Student Centred Curriculum.

What is the case study about?

This case study investigates the aspects of the Learning2014 strategy that lead to a greater preparedness for subject coordinators to use OERs. It demonstrates how an institution can take advantage of systemic changes to influence transformations that will have a positive impact on student learning. It has long been recognised that changes to university infrastructure has an impact on teaching but changing the buildings alone does not necessarily lead academics to design different learning experiences. Introduction of the Learning2014 strategy provided an opportunity to work with a committed group of university teachers to explore ways of making more effective use of new teaching spaces to improve learning outcomes[1]. The goal was to encourage a more collaborative model of learning that improves the overall student experience of studying at UTS, and combines the best of face-to-face and online learning opportunities.

What is the issue or need you are addressing?

Participants in this case study were nominated because they had made major changes to the ways in which they facilitate learning in their subjects. Each had been asked to review their teaching practices to ensure they provided the best of online and best of f2f experiences for students. This included consideration of whether OERs could replace some of their current teaching and learning practices. As a result of this review subject coordinators significantly improved some poor performing subjects (particularly in regards to failure rates), introduced new approaches related to the use of collaborative rooms, or automated some of their of their teaching processes (eg using student response systems in their lectures, automating the availability of lectures or quizzes in UTSOnline and monitoring student progress in online learning packages.

As a result of these initiatives, many subject coordinators have become recognised as leaders in the area, either being promoted to Course Directors, by being awarded Learning2014 Fellowships which include the role of encouraging others to make the transition to Learning2014, or by enjoying a profile in the faculty as someone who has embracing new approaches.

This reputation was based on their commitment to designing learning differently and being known to have taken tangible steps to change the ways in which students achieve the learning outcomes in their subjects. The motivation for these changes was sometimes expressed as a conscious decision to get on-board with the Learning2014 strategy sooner rather than later. For others it stemmed from feeling inspired after participating in Learning2014 events, such as FLAG meetings, Learning2014 festival and presentations in faculties by the DVC (Education and Students). In a few cases existing subjects already demonstrated the features of Learning2014 and no further changes were required.

How was the initiative implemented?

The need to change practices in keeping with the aims underpinning the design of the new learning environment was a theme that developed around all professional development activities throughout 2014. A steering group lead by the DVC (Education and Students) was convened in late 2012 to devise a strategy that would encourage university teachers to adopt the best of face-to-face and the best of online teaching practices. The strategy involved articulating a clear vision for the change and then creating the conditions in the university that made it possible for teachers to 'make that vision their own'. This group met on a weekly basis to monitor progress in the transition to Learning2014 practices. Resources related to Learning2014 were created for the university web site, included videos, case studies, guides for implementation.

The strategy began with a review of existing teaching infrastructure and likely

changes that would be introduced in the new collaborative learning spaces. The DVC (Education and Students) created a vision of the Future of Learning at UTS and took this to the faculties to construct a narrative on the long-term needs of student learning. This helped to define for faculties that the Learning2014 strategy was simple evidence-based good practice in teaching and learning. This vision had strong support from the Vice-Chancellor who also promoted it in the faculties.

Creating the conditions that made it possible for academics to make the vision their own included offering grants and awards for Learning2014 projects. This element of the strategy recognised that an important part of the changes would be in content creation. Project funding was provided in the form of learning and teaching grants to allow experimentation with new ways of facilitating learning suitable for the learning spaces. This was primarily used to pay learning resources developers to create resources. This strategy provide to be successful and full time Learning Technologists were employed later in the year. An alternative form of funding was provided by the Flipped Learning Action Group which met monthly to share approaches and outcomes. The large classes project identified the challenge of teaching in subject that had a large number of repeat lectures and provided in-class lecture recording to support the transition to Learning2014.

In addition, Annual Teaching & Learning Forums were held with Learning2014 as a theme, a series of workshops were held in faculties including Teaching and learning technology workshops and lunchtime presentations in the Library on OER and Commons licences, technology, etc. A Learning2014 festival was held to coincide with the opening of the first of the new buildings with purpose built learning spaces.

The recognition and reward elements of the strategy involved identifying Learning2014 Fellows whose role was to promote Learning2014 practices in their faculties.. It also involved recognition of Learning2014 implementation in promotion, as well as creation of a special category in the annual VC's awards

The third element of the strategy involved monitoring progress towards the implementation of Learning2014. This began with modelling of teaching in faculties that would be moving into new buildings and evaluating their impact when working in different spaces. Subject audits were then conducted to identify the level of transition each faculty was making. High level negotiation between Deans and DVC (Education and Students) on agreement for change was negotiated with each faculties. This included piloting a peer review process to determine how closely faculty changes aligned with the faculty agreements.

Outcomes

Eighteen subject coordinators who had adopted Learning2014 practices by the end of 2014 were identified for this case study. The range of change varied from four subject coordinators who identified their subjects already used Learning2014 practices to subject coordinators who completely redesigned of their subject in line with Learning2014 practices. The four subjects already using Learning2014 practices described a range of incremental changes since their subject was first implemented to make use of new technologies, to get students more actively involved in learning or to respond to student feedback.

The most common area of major change was to introduce In-class activities into tutorials or workshops. These activities often involved collaborative problem solving or students engaged in extended project work. Some introduced discussion of lecture material. The goal was to increased feedback on student performance through immediate feedback in tutorials.

The increased active learning in tutorials and workshops was normally accomplished with a corresponding change in the lectures. Overall the goal was to reduce the number of hours students spend in lectures. In a few cases where there were no tutorials the lecture time was maintained and made more interactive with in-lecture polling technology.

The most common change to lectures was to replace guest lectures with video recordings. This was seen to have a number of benefits in regards to logistics of arranging speakers, managing the quality of

presentations and student behaviour in lectures.

In a few cases subject coordinators replaced some or all of their own lectures with video recordings. In most cases the justification was that lecture attendance had been falling and students requested a more convenient way of accessing the subject content.

Some form of online quiz usually accompanied lectures that were replaced by some other mode of delivery. The quiz questions might be in the learning management system or constructed in elearning software. In one case this involved a mastery learning model where students needed to demonstrate competence prior to attending tutorials.

Changes were also made to assessment to make them more authentic or engaging to the students. Add a greater reflective component.

In two cases the most significant change was the improvement of communication with students through automated software to deal with increase class sizes.

Issues & challenges

This case study demonstrates that institution-wide strategies can bring about profound changes in teaching practices. Of the three approaches used in the Learning2014 strategy—recognition, reward and monitoring progress—it was recognition that had the greatest impact on early adopters' decisions to make a change to their teaching practice. In instances where there was a close alignment between the vision and current practice there was a general willingness to be recognised as being an early adopter of the strategy. Those who saw benefits in strategy also demonstrated a willingness to make wholesale changes to subject design. Where there was partial commitment to the strategy, individuals cherry-picked from a range of possibilities to suit their own ends.

This raises a major challenge for the transition to the use of OERs. Most subject coordinators searched for OERs during the initial design phase of their review of their subject and decided they were unable to find any OERs suitable for their subject. Their key criterion for selection was the

resources had to be relevant to the specific context addressed by their subject. Where OERs were used they were almost all freely available video material, such as TEDx talks and YouTube videos. They were seen as beneficial because they brought in expertise that didn't reside with the lecturer and was currently addressed with guest lectures either for content or generic skills development like report writing or team work. They required minimal intervention from the lecturer other that to point the student's attention to the appropriate components in the recording.

With recognition being a strong motivating factor in this kind of academic work, the modification of existing resources to contextualise resources for an Australian context is a major challenge in the adoption of OERs. It requires time and expertise that could be better used for the lecturer's own content creation and thereby receive recognition as an innovator in teaching and learning. All of the videos recommended to students were considered to be supplementary to the main content and a lack of recognition for the adaption of resources created competition with licensed resources that provide a bundled solution tailored to the lecturer's needs. Added to that, lecturers are aware that students are finding there own OERs and encourage students to share resources with fellow students. A number of academics recognized the need to balance external resources with a sense of presence by the lecturer.

Insights and Recommendations for National and/or Institutional Development

An aim of the Learning2014 strategy was to encourage subject coordinators to make greater use of OERs when redesigning their subjects. When asked about considering the use of OERs, academics saw the value in, and wanted to use, freely available resources but were unable to integrate them as a core component of their subjects because they had trouble finding something that was a good fit for their subject.

Subject coordinators express two conditions for selecting learning resources. They were happy to outsource content creation to other people as long as it was

as good as something they could produce themselves and provided them with a complete package that required minimal further modification. Alternatively, they were happy to create their own resources as long as they received an appropriate level recognition in terms of workload and/or building a reputation as an innovator in subject design.

Their experiences in searching and integrating OERs in their subject was between these two expressed desires. In most cases, OERs are not seen as high enough quality or not coming as a complete package and therefore required modification to integrate them into their specific subject. However, subject coordinators did not believe they would receive sufficient recognition for the work required to adapt existing resources to warrant making the changes. Rather than recognition for adaption, they perceived that all the incentives went for creating new resources. This was particularly encouraged by the offer of teaching and learning grants.

In addition, the move to flipped learning encouraged faculties to look for licensed materials. They recognised the value of the library assisting in finding materials and there was also pressure on the library from academics to purchase ever more resources. This was often encouraged by publishers who promote the distinctive features of their product. Once a resource is purchased by the library it needs to get a return on the investment and the level of expertise developed by library staff on particular resources. It therefore promotes the resources that they know really well and encourage academics from around the university to use already purchased licensed materials.

The encouragement to use OERs is only likely to succeed if there is an institution-wide approach that makes adoption and modification of OERs more attractive to subject coordinators. To address the address the perverse incentives that make it more beneficial to create new resources than to re-use existing one it will be necessary to develop a mechanism for the recognition of adaption of OERs in university reward structures. This recognition will need to vary depending on whether OER use replaces or supplements current material.

A relatively simple approach would be to change any learning and teaching granting schemes so they are weighted towards adaptation rather than creation.

The central role of the library in searching and curating resources suggests any changes to granting schemes ought to include an expansion of the library role in promoting the adoption of OER use. This would likewise require an incentive to encourage libraries to share OERs instead of their licenced materials. The library has extensive expertise in finding resources and resolving licensing agreements that would like to see the maximum return on investment made on licensed material. Without savings created by providing OERs being returned to the library in some form, it is unlikely that they will promote OERs where there is overlap with their licensed materials.

This case study demonstrated that it is possible to develop partnerships between subject specialists, library staff and learning technologies to adopt and adapt existing resources so they are relevant to the specific context addressed in their subject. The different levels of resource licensing makes adaption complicated for individual academics and is an area of expertise that libraries are able to provide subject design team. Bringing the library into this partnership also provides an opportunity to mining data from the library collection to identify the areas of greatest learning difficulties.

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