Where Has the Effort Gone?

The Quest to Sustain Momentum

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Recently, a colleague from outside of Cranfield University (www.cranfield.ac.uk) shared with me an observation about the institution: “You used to be doing some pretty interesting stuff, but we don’t hear much of what you are doing now—it seems to have all gone rather quiet!”

And I had to agree. We really don’t have many innovations to showcase, and the same familiar faces can be seen at the forums and user groups hosted across our institution. (I hasten to add here that we live inside two cultures: a traditional university culture and a defence forces culture; more on that later.) But when I’ve shared this comment with colleagues within my institution, I’ve had various responses. Is this necessarily a cause for concern? Has interest died away? Have people given up in frustration? Is it a timely wake-up call? Or is it just that we have reached a steady state, that the initial discourse over flexible, distance, and e-learning has settled back to “business as usual,” enabling new educational principles and practices to be bedded down within the institution?

Certainly there has been a lot of effort over the years, but it has come in stops and starts and, for the most part, the enthusiasm and commitment still resides primarily with the few early adopters. In fact, some of the leading lights and early adopters have departed, feeling disenfranchised or even bitter about the innovation process as it has impacted them. There have been some winners, but actually the successes have been mostly in the past and even the “flagship” programs are beginning to look “a bit creaky,” to quote another colleague.

So where has the effort gone? For a relatively small postgraduate university, we have devoted considerable resources to support flexible course design, development, and delivery, especially at one campus. On this one campus alone, we have three central service groups supporting various
aspects of flexible teaching and learning—one focusing on pedagogy, learning design, and academic staff support; one on design, development, and production of courseware (particularly high-end, large-scale customized programs); and yet another on specialized IT infrastructure and delivery requirements. Of course, the demarcation between these services is never quite so distinct, particularly from the customer perspective—which has led to a degree of confusion over who does what and on what basis. Questions arise such as “Do I go to department A or B for advice if I want to revamp my course?” and “Is there a charge for this service or not?” The answer, “it depends,” and a suggestion to begin the request process again with a different service group are not especially satisfying from the customer perspective!

The degree of complexity is even greater because key IT services, such as our primary virtual learning environment (vle) provision, are outsourced and because additional online development services are situated within academic departments. The organizational context is indeed a significant contributing factor to the efficacy of flexible-learning programs (Rossiter 2006), and ours is a particularly obfuscating one.

Why is this, and where are we in the flexible and e-learning journey?

As an institution, despite being involved with technology-mediated and flexible modes of learning for many years, we have yet to progress beyond Rogers’ (2003) early innovative adoption stage (Rossiter 2007). This phase is characterized by pockets of enthusiasts in academic departments “doing their own thing”—some from personal preference, but others subscribing still to the “not invented here” position. There are those who are ignorant of what could be achieved, and yet others, quite honestly, argue they can’t afford the time or the cost (where institutional charges apply). Not surprisingly, we have yet to reach a critical mass of user engagement with flexible learning, with approximately 54 percent of courses active on our vle and 53 percent of enrolled students possessing vle accounts.

**Barriers to the Adoption of Flexible Learning**

So what have been the barriers or constraints that have hindered not just adoption of the vle and online usage but, more importantly, the
embedding of flexible and e-learning into institutional practice? I have identified four such constraints: distinctive cultures within the organization, exceedingly diverse learner characteristics, course development and student experience, and contextually derived conceptions of quality.

*Distinctive Cultures within the Boundary of a University/Defence Organization*

One of the most impermeable and resilient barriers is culture. Culture is widely acknowledged as a barrier to change within most organizations (Hrastinski, Keller, and Lindh 2009), and certainly within institutions of higher education, but ours has particularly complex overlays as we grapple with two organizational cultures—university and military or defence-related. Within the university, many academic staff, uncertain of and uncommitted to constantly changing futures, are reticent to relinquish the traditional course-development model (essentially a do-it-yourself approach) and to explore an alternative partnership model between academic and professional staff (learning designers, multimedia developers, and so on).

These academic staff, while appreciating the increasing demand for greater flexibility in course delivery, are trying to balance competing demands from research, consultancies, and teaching. They therefore tend to adopt a minimalist approach, typically a course conversion model that simply transfers a didactic pedagogy, with which they are familiar, to the online environment. The end product can be online lecture recordings with PowerPoint.

So rather than considering an alternative (for some, radical) partnership approach to course development, the sort of assistance these academic staff seek from support units is primarily administrative (e.g., copyright clearance) or technical assistance. This is akin to a procurement supply-chain process—an academic lead stipulates his or her “requirements” to the supplier with the expectation that the learning “product” will be churned out at the other end, preferably with minimal impact on academic staff time. In other words, the lecturer (as client or patron) sponsors the work but has limited appreciation of the professional skills or production processes required to complete the work. This is perfectly practicable if one is largely engaged in a course “conversion,” but where this model falls
down is when there is a clear need to move beyond online course support to either a course-enhanced or a fully online or distance approach. Where the lecturer concerned has insufficient knowledge or understanding of flexible and online learning environments and fails to work closely with the professional-development support team, this schism is often reflected in poor learning design, inadequate learner support, and an overall impoverished learning experience for the student. If a fee-for-service model is imposed for professional course-development services as well, then the academic staff motivation and usage of such services clearly wanes.

From the military perspective, there is a degree of skepticism or wariness about an education and training environment that shifts the locus of control from teacher/instructor to student/learner. In this environment, there has always been a strong chain-of-command training and education ethos built on formal, top-down educational interventions. The culture, therefore, tends to resist, either implicitly or explicitly, an emphasis on self-directed or informal student-centric approaches, especially those that encourage learner-generated content or use of social Web 2.0 technologies. The suspicion that students are not learning while engaging with, say, blogs or wikis has led to a reluctance of some senior officers to sanction such learning activities while in the workplace. This transfers an additional burden back to students, who are forced to undertake coursework on their own time, whereas previously they were used to “being taught” during work hours.

So from the student perspective—particularly military students imbued with an instructor-led, learner-dependent, and time-poor culture—there appears to be insufficient introduction or ongoing support to scaffold the kind of flexible or distance learning that would enable a productive and rewarding learning experience.

Diverse Learner Characteristics
The vast majority of our learners are mature-age students, and while distance and online learning offers them greater flexibility in the workplace and in their lifestyles, many are not well equipped to be confident and successful independent learners. As a research-led postgraduate institution at Cranfield Defence and Security (www.cranfield.ac.uk/cds), we have an atypical student demographic in contrast to larger undergraduate universities, and this fact raises challenging student-support issues. In 2008–9, 85
percent of our students were enrolled in postgraduate taught courses, but only 21 percent were full time (the rest were enrolled in part-time or “flexible” mode). We also had a significant cohort (78% of our overall student population) enrolled in short courses, and this group had very limited time to develop the appropriate learning and study skills. In addition, not only did 15 percent of our students come from outside the UK, but they came from fifty-six countries throughout Europe, Asia Pacific, Africa, and the Americas, which raised interesting cultural and diversity issues. Significantly, almost 55 percent of our students were military and therefore came from a strong tradition of formal instructor-led face-to-face teaching. Not only do such students feel familiar and comfortable with a didactic pedagogy, but the peer support available through face-to-face training and classroom interactions has proven to be a significant motivator for their learning success.

Recognizing these needs, we have developed support programs to assist students with flexible and e-learning, including academic study skills and information literacy. For example, the information literacy online tutorials (diglib.shrivenham.cranfield.ac.uk/ilit) were a substantial investment on the part of our institution, involving two years of research and one year in development. Developed as stand-alone high-quality resources for time-poor students, they are accessible at multiple levels of subject granularity or sophistication, allowing learners to dip in and out with a light or a deep learning approach. The tutorials are non-compulsory support activities, designed to be highly interactive, engaging, and fun, but despite this we suspect they are still viewed by a number of students as additional work rather than essential skills to enable academic or lifelong learning.

Of course, we have student help desk services for IT assistance and vle support, and seminars and programs to assist students in the use of electronic resources and library services. But recently, with a growing appreciation of the particular needs of our students, Cranfield has embarked on a comprehensive review of these services to ascertain how we can provide a more “joined-up” and effective service.

Course Development and the Student Experience:
Successes and Challenges
We have considerable experience in large-scale course development. We have a contract, for example, to develop and maintain for the Ministry
of Defence (MOD) UK what, to my knowledge, is still one of the largest-scale e-learning programs in the world. “Military Knowledge I and II” is an e-learning program for all British junior army officers comprising 156 high-quality, interactive lessons with well over one hundred hours of online study. This program has been studied at any one time by over two thousand students around the world. And for our taught courses, we have a rigorous quality-process framework for designing and developing courses (Scott and Cong 2007).

And yet, in my view, one of the greatest challenges we face at present is creating an integrated learning experience for our learners. As a distinctive postgraduate university, Cranfield is justifiably proud of its reputation for providing a quality student experience, characterized by small class sizes and personal attention. However, in our attempts to adapt this experience to an online and distance environment, I believe we have struggled to provide, in a consistent way, the equivalent high standard across all courses and modules to enable a cohesive student experience. In particular, we have yet to implement an integrated through-life program of student services, commencing with the marketing of courses and progressing through enrolment, induction, access to information resources, use of vLEs and online assessment, career advice, and alumni services. Our students grapple with different user system interfaces, processes, log-ons, and passwords, at times receiving well-meaning but contradictory information from different service groups.

Student evaluation of course quality is captured, but at times student feedback relates more to ephemeral experiences (whether they found the course entertaining or the cost of printing in the library) rather than a more rigorous assessment of the quality, appropriateness, or currency of the course content, structure, or learning activities.

Contextually Derived Conceptions of Quality
As an educational community, we have begun to engage constructively in a discourse about pedagogical considerations, learning designs, and appropriate choice of learning technologies, topics that underpin quality course development and delivery. However, what we are finding in places is an underlying mismatch between various stakeholders’ conceptions of quality, in particular with respect to flexible and distance learning within
the context of the shared university and defence sector environment. Many within the academic community favour a higher-education conception of quality as “quality enhancement,” encouragement of improvement in learning, where a high degree of responsibility resides with the faculty and with an academic course leader (Wright 2003). However, all the courses we deliver on behalf of the MOD must comply with an approach grounded in the principles of standards and audit (Higher Education Academy 2008). The MOD-endorsed strategic principles underpin all training management functions as a means to ensure that education and training meets operational requirements, to benchmark provision of training and education, and to provide a framework to develop and implement a Quality Management System.

This is certainly a challenging situation. However, the debate about quality in teaching and learning is not only a healthy sign of innovation maturity within an organization but is also of strategic importance to the future of flexible learning within Cranfield. How effectively this debate is managed as we move forward will be crucial. If we view the two conceptions, enhancement and assurance, as dichotomies, there is a risk that a negative tension will take hold among the various stakeholders, undermining the quality of educational courses and the relationships of those who develop and deliver them. Where such tensions go unchecked, the key values underpinning quality education—those of commitment, endeavour, and trust—tend to dissipate and to be replaced by indifference and attempts to evade institutional quality processes.

What is needed is a “whole of organization” approach, bringing together university managers, administrators, academic and professional staff, and our key customer, the MOD. The underlying principles of higher education and lifelong learning support the notion of quality enhancement, continually striving to improve educational outcomes. But there does need to be recognition of the essential part played by setting and monitoring performance against appropriate standards, especially with respect to the processes that underpin the student’s overall learning experience.

Rather than an overemphasis or reliance on a top-down imposed quality-assurance audit process, I believe a different dynamic is needed to promote the creation of shared objectives for institutional improvement.
A dialogic approach is an inclusive way to achieve quality enhancement, to bring about a coalescence between the ongoing discoveries and developments that occur within disciplines in the academic environment and the business improvements developed by the managers of administrative systems (Higher Education Academy 2008).

A common theme has been emerging from this story: fragmentation of effort and commitment (at one time exemplified as a culture that valued individuality) can hold us back and, in some areas, has begun to dissipate or destabilize many of the early gains we made in flexible and e-learning.

MITIGATING INTERVENTIONS

Two mitigating interventions are being pursued: formulating a new institutional strategy and actively building stronger collaborative environments.

A New Approach to Developing Our Institutional Strategy
To date, Cranfield has been progressing loosely toward an emergent strategy with respect to flexible and e-learning (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel 2008, chap. 7). This is consistent with the journey taken by many universities (in the mould of learning organizations), as they move from a cottage industry and silo culture toward a more institutional and integrated model of flexible and e-learning.

At Cranfield, however, we have reached the stage where fragmented processes and competing aspirations are beginning to populate the space created by a lack of consensus and of a clear sense of strategic direction. Furthermore, as an institution, I feel we have been grappling with this uncertainty for some time. We have come from an era where the claim “we are not a distance-education institution” has been ingrained, and we have prided ourselves on the face-to-face experience and personal student attention. Yet, at the same time, we have developed substantial online learning programs and have established organizational units to support flexible and e-learning accordingly. But much of this, as is typical of early innovation stages, has grown in an ad hoc fashion, without a clear strategy to focus our efforts.
There are, however, positive signs ahead. We are, in a number of ways, well placed to develop a clearer strategy for flexible and distance learning. First and foremost, there is widespread agreement on the need to do so. We have a good understanding of some of the strategic drivers that have moved us inexorably in the direction of flexibility and student-centred learning (our mantra has always been “student focused”). Significantly, these drivers include the expectations and demands of our customers, particularly the requirements of our primary customer, the MOD. They also include a genuine desire on the part of many staff to enhance or improve the quality of our educational offerings.

But while there is generally consensus about why we want to implement flexible learning, where we are heading and how we will get there are still fairly hazy. In some quarters, they are even contentious. Furthermore, we now need to create a more widespread sense of urgency, particularly with some key decision makers, to see this process through the turbulent waters of strategy formulation. Inevitably, without a more developed strategic framework, policies and procedures are at best piecemeal and at worst counterproductive. One challenge we face is translating our previous successful student-centric teaching and learning into well-formulated and contextually aligned strategy, policy and procedures.

Given our complex organizational environment, sound policies to promote flexibility and quality in technology-mediated learning are required to establish the boundaries of decision making and control, but not so tightly as to constrain the responsiveness and adaptability required to personalize teaching and learning experience (Birch and Burnett 2009; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2005; Rossiter 2006). With some notable exceptions—for example, our policy on the use of the Turnitin assessment tool—our teaching and learning policies to date have not embraced the new modalities of teaching and learning. Few, for example, make reference to flexible or technology-enabled practice. While existing policies have been well suited to our long-standing campus-based culture, in many respects they are now proving to be lacking with respect to the complexities of our current environment.

We are therefore currently putting considerable effort into developing a new strategic framework to address the gaps and shortcomings that have emerged since our first entry into flexible and e-learning.
Stronger Collaborative Environments

The second intervention proposes the active fostering and building up of strong collaborative environments by rewarding those who cross organizational boundaries, break down the silo culture, and find new ways of working together. For example, we are examining ways in which librarians and information specialists can work with educational designers and learning advisors in small, subject-based teams, advising and consulting with academic staff who are developing or adapting courses. Furthermore, greater collaboration among colleagues working in staff development, educational research, and support units could improve our postgraduate teaching certificate program, and interdepartmental projects involving academic staff and leading practitioners could enhance research capability.

It is the promotion and strengthening of networks, communities of practice, and “spheres of influence” (Wheatley and Freize 2006) that create the energy needed to infuse creativity and good practice into an institutional milieu. A critical mass of such users can bring about solutions that address both the scalability and sustainability of educational innovation. At present, there are pockets of interest groups at Cranfield, but these have been relatively weak and have struggled to find momentum or traction within our institution.

To date, I argue that we have been focusing on adoption or uptake, not on the more mature processes associated with embedding flexible learning (Rossiter 2006, 2007). We have lacked targeted institutional policy and process designed to embed flexible learning into institutional teaching and learning practice, and to give newer modes an equal sense of legitimacy to that enjoyed by traditional face-to-face teaching. One such policy would aim to provide incentives for staff to engage with, even excel in, design and development of flexible-learning courses. Many staff are genuinely seeking help about how to engage more constructively with these challenges, although they are confused as to how to go about it. But we are responding positively. The school executive, for example, recently introduced a scheme to encourage good teaching practice with teaching-recognition awards.

Successful collaborations and co-operative ways of working can be sustained when there are agreed-upon institutional understandings and quality frameworks built around the student experience rather than
existing institutional processes or conventional practices of teaching and course design.

THE FUTURE

The cultural, structural, and process issues I have highlighted have influenced our capacity to embed flexible learning, but it would be simplistic to suggest that this is the full picture. Cranfield is currently embarking on some major changes, and I sense there is both general recognition of the need for flexible learning and a commitment to take the next significant step forward in this journey. However, as Senge et al. (1999, 15) argue, “It is not enough to change strategies, structures and systems, unless the thinking that produced those strategies, structures and systems also changes.”

How we change, how we think about flexible learning and what “student-centred” means in new electronic environments and within our dual-culture context, will influence how successfully we are able to embed the best of flexible and e-learning into our learning and teaching philosophy and practice. So now I feel our challenge is less about analyzing the question, “Where has the effort gone?” and more about answering, in an optimistic spirit, the question, “Where do we need to direct our effort for best effect?”

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

As a new graduate, Darien Rossiter moved from Sydney, Australia, to take up a position as a teacher librarian in Canberra, the nation’s “bush capital.” Seeking ways to satisfy her creative side, she has melded her somewhat disparate interests into a diverse career working in higher education, government, and industry as a media producer, educational designer, learning technologist, marketing director, researcher, and consultant. In 2005, she took a post at Cranfield University at the Defence Academy of the United Kingdom, where she was responsible for library and information services, e-learning, academic staff and student support, and creative design, portal, and web development. In 2010 she returned to Australia, where she is now responsible for the portfolio of academic programs and services for the diverse student population of the Open Universities of Australia. Her interests centre on organizational design and change management, but her commitment to facilitating quality learning experiences that motivate and engage students has remained constant. darien.rossiter@open.edu.au