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Coaching the transition to flexible learning: re-thinking instructional design

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Abstract: This paper reviews the experiences of an educational development project devised to support teaching staff responsible for curriculum redesign during the transition to a successful technology-facilitated off-campus study programme. The approach adopted a just-in-time (JIT) coaching model rather than a just-in-case (JIC) training model for educational support. Structured and semi-structured discussions with individuals and the entire staff cohort were used to catalyse and sustain the redesign and rethinking process. Repeatedly collecting and responding to student feedback within any given course enabled a rapid and focussed approach to redesign and redevelopment. Up to three or four iterations of course development informed in this way were required to finalise course transformation. Team and peer-group approaches to course redevelopment may help diminish the initially high level of dependency on external educational development support.

Keywords: coaching; instructional design; flexible learning

Introduction

The term flexible learning has particular currency in the Australasia region, but attracts a variety of interpretations depending on context. By the mid to late 1990s, Australian higher education had seen the removal of a system of designated distance education providers, a sharp increase in student numbers, and increasing proliferation of networked desktop technologies. In this context, the term flexible learning became increasingly synonymous with course adaptations intended to harness technology to meet changing student circumstances and needs. Institutions characterised by a tradition of residential on-campus education as much as those with a history of provision of traditional (print-based) distance education became interested in exploring options and possibilities.

This paper reviews the experiences of one such exploration (educational development project). The project was devised to support teaching staff responsible for curriculum redesign during the transition to a successful technology-facilitated off-campus study programme. The institutional context is highly research intensive and emphasises on-campus education. Recently, however, the University has begun actively exploring distributed and flexible approaches in niche settings which permit it to better meet changing national and student needs.
Drawing on a history of many years of collaboration between the ANU Centre for Educational Development and Academic Methods (CEDAM) and the Legal Workshop (LW) group in the Faculty of Law, the project spanned a 12-month academic year in 2001. The study programme is a Graduate Diploma in Legal Practice (GDLP). It is taken by more than 150 students per year from all over Australia as well as overseas, many of whom are employed in a wide range of work environments. There are some 15 separate courses of study, involving a comparable number of instructors and half as many support staff. The maximum duration of any course is eight weeks, and a number of different student cohorts may complete a given course within a calendar year.

The paper explores some of the instructional design issues and lessons learned about supporting curriculum change in such a context: it argues in favour of a just-in-time (JIT) coaching model rather than a just-in-case (JIC) training model for educational support.

**Project purpose and conceptual framework**

The primary goal of the project was to support technologically mediated educational change, another purpose was to evaluate the experience for broader university learning. The project was conceived as an exercise in action learning (e.g., McGill & Beaty, 1995): learning that would flow from experience and reflection at three distinct (but nested) levels. As indicated in Figure 1, the levels were:

- individual courses and curricula;
- the whole of the programme (involving the entire suite of courses taken by students completing the GDLP); and
- the institution.

At the level of the institution, CEDAM was interested in learning about practical options for moving beyond the provision of an instructional design service of the sort that traditionally had become established in designated distance education provider institutions. Importantly, even from within such an institution, Herman, Fox and Boyd (1997) have noted the desirability of such developments. These authors discuss the failures of the industrial and craftworker models of university teaching, and argue that “the role of instructional designer may need to change to provide support, project management skills, expert knowledge, evaluation expertise and reflective opportunities” (p. 199). Accordingly, our vision embraced Argyris and Schöns’s (1978) notion of ‘double loop learning’. We wanted not only to ensure that successful redevelopment of curricula occurred during the lifetime of the project but, at the same time, sought to strengthen in-house capacity within LW to continue to mount and manage such course redevelopment activities in the future.

The project was structured as a cooperative undertaking between the Faculty of Law and CEDAM. Late in 2000 a project officer (learning design support trainee consultant) was appointed in CEDAM to a hybrid position comprising both workplace and study responsibilities. The position description was designed to reflect the conceptual stance described above and, in part, read as follows:

The position would suit a recent graduate who has some familiarity with the concept of instructional design…

The intention is not so much to provide an instructional design service for areas, rather it is to facilitate areas’ capacities to re-think teaching practice … to draw on instructional design concepts and reinforce the ethos of a research-led institution. The aim is to move beyond classical instructional design models and exploit opportunities opened up by new
technologies. … a component of the study programme will investigate the extent to which this aim is achieved.

By far the main responsibility (and most time consuming component of the workload) in this position involved one-on-one consulting with instructors in LW who were redesigning and redeveloping courses for access by students off-campus through WebCT. A key principle informing the advice to instructors, is that of alignment of curriculum goals, student activities and assessment, explained by Biggs (1999).

**Project activities: supporting innovation**

Day-to-day activities during the project centred on the course and, to a lesser extent, programme levels (see Figure 1), and these are discussed below under the following sub-headings:

- Harnessing student feedback
- Coaching
- Identifying and dealing with programme-level matters
Harnessing student feedback
To encourage an action learning approach at the level of the individual course and instructor we developed a simple, practical and robust means for soliciting formative student feedback (Figure 2). The approach adopted is an adaptation of the ‘One minute’ paper described by Angelo and Cross (1993). These authors advocate two questions of the generic form: What worked well? What needs improvement? As can be seen in Figure 2, we applied this rubric explicitly to the theme of technology and its application, but also sought broad comment on the theme of student learning, giving a total of four questions.

In practice this was a compromise design. The questions were fewer, and not as specific as we would have liked. Feedback was sought by email, using the project officer as an intermediary to ensure anonymity and to do preliminary sorting and collation of responses. However, the direct approach by email, along with the short and simple structure meant that students tended to be very responsive: something that we were unable to achieve with a web form approach.

Questionnaire for rapid student feedback
Please note that this feedback process is entirely anonymous. Student responses will be collated within CEDAM, before being sent to the lecturer. No response will be attributable to any individual.

Please answer the following four questions.

1. Please comment briefly on the technology used to support your learning in this course:
   1a. What worked well, and why?
   1b. What needs to be improved, and why?

2. Please comment briefly on your learning in this course:
   2a. in relation to the course content (eg. breadth & depth of issues addressed, their relevance, etc.)
   2b. in relation to your overall experience (eg. how well the assessment, course resources and learning activities fitted together, and your interaction with the lecturer/other students)

Figure 2. Email-based questionnaire used to obtain formative feedback from students to assist with course redesign and redevelopment.

Feedback was frequently sought at an early stage within a course, with a view to acting on it for the benefit of the current student cohort. Often, thoughtful and detailed feedback was provided, and this more than made up for the lack of specificity in the questions used. Further, the reality was that the capacity to act on a wide range of detailed feedback was often constrained in practice, so there was little or no purpose in seeking greater specificity.
Coaching played a central role in the one-on-one consulting. Coaching does not denote ‘telling someone what to do’ or a ‘senior-junior’ or ‘expert-novice’ partnership of the sort that apply in a mentoring situation. Rather, coaching is concerned with developing an empathetic understanding of an individual’s situation and then assisting them to view it from alternative perspectives and to explore possibilities for change. The idea is to expose possibilities, tease out likely or attractive approaches, and encourage active invention and experimentation.

Coaching activities have been widely appreciated and studied for many years in sports contexts (e.g., Pate, McClenaghan & Rotella, 1984). They are gaining increasing credence in business settings too, with Thomas (1995, p. 13) for example, suggesting that:

“Coaching is a much underrated management skill. It has a major part to play in achieving results through other people. The aim of the ideal coaching situation is to allow the subordinate to complete a task the manager has assigned, while at the same time strengthening the subordinate’s skills ready to take on the responsibility for that and similar assigned tasks in the future.

The aim of coaching, therefore, is organisational excellence through the effective use of everyone’s abilities and potential, in a way that allows growth in knowledge and experience.”

As elaborated in the following sections, with the substitution of ‘peer’ or ‘colleague’ for terms such as ‘subordinate’ and ‘manager’, this quotation outlines the way in which the CEDAM consultants sought to foster in-house instructional design capacity within the LW group. It also highlights the way in which the two CEDAM consultants worked together to strengthen the consultancy service and activities being offered.

Conversation, discussion, and dialogue were central to the coaching process. Brookfield and Preskill (1999) make a useful distinction between the three:

- **Conversation** is an exchange of thoughts and feelings where genial cooperation prevails. Participants can be aimless and carefree.
- **Discussion** is concerned with the development of knowledge and understanding. Participants are disciplined and mutually responsive.
- **Dialogue** aims at disequilibrium, pushing beyond a ‘comfort’ zone, often for the purpose of exploration and inquiry. Participants are collaborators intent on resolving the problem or issue they face.

Conversation, discussion and dialogue lie at the heart of the cyclic action-reflection process (Figure 1) and the distinctions are important in the two sections that follow.

**Coaching course design**

Coaching the rethinking of curriculum formed the core activity at the level of course renewal. Discussion and dialogue provided the means to elicit contextual detail as well as inject educational advice. Initially, however, rapport, trust and mutual respect needed to be built up between the relevant individuals through conversation. Thereafter, discussion assisted

- the instructor to interpret the student feedback collected by email;
- the instructor to reflect on this feedback and canvas alternative approaches to curriculum design; and
- the educational consultant to deepen their appreciation of contextual factors impinging on instructor activities.

Discussions provoke each participant to recount details of their situation for the benefit of the other. In the process, they encourage reflection and open the opportunity for dialogue. The educational
consultant, as coach, may deliberately exaggerate or distort the image being presented by the
instructor in a way intended to provoke an alternative perspective and a commitment to try out an
alternative approach, preparatory to achieving constructive change.

Boundary-pushing dialogue involving an educational consultant relies for its success on a previously
developed rapport and an established trust. It also benefits from the consultant being an ‘outsider’. Self- and peer-talk often falls short of ‘pushing the boundaries’ in any sort of constructive way. The security afforded a consultant, as one who is outside the group where changes will be implemented, amounts to a licence to more aggressively explore the boundaries. With such privileged access to professionals’ private teaching worlds, however, come commensurate responsibilities in the form of ethical considerations and the need for discretion and judgement in communicating more widely any insights gained.

It was important to be sensitive to the situation in which instructors find themselves working, and to start discussions with a relevant and timely practical perspective. For this reason, JIT rather than JIC approaches to provision of coaching support were essential. JIT approaches imply a state of constant readiness to respond to inquiries, and this can be very demanding. Timely responses to telephone, email and face-to-face encounters ideally demands an ability and willingness to rearrange your own work priorities at short notice.

Coaching the coach
Coaching through conversation, discussion and dialogue not only formed the basis of semi-structured one-on-one interaction between the junior-consultant and LW staff, but also lay at the heart of the senior-junior consultant mentor professional relationship and associated ‘coach the coach’ activities conducted within CEDAM. As with the LW consulting, these ‘coach the coach’ activities took place primarily on a JIT basis, involving ‘briefing’ and ‘debriefing’ sessions that often formed a ‘sandwich’ around course design consulting sessions. In this way they offered valued scaffolding for the ‘trainee’ and modelled approaches and practice (in accord with the notion of cognitive apprenticeship; see Collins, Brown & Newman, 1989).

The ‘trainee debriefing’ sessions yielded useful insights into particular strengths and weaknesses of both the teaching innovations being trialed by LW instructors as well as our own CEDAM strategies for managing and supporting the consulting process. They therefore provided a structure and impetus for continuous reflection and improvement of the educational advisory service provided by CEDAM.

In both the ‘coaching course design’ and ‘coaching the coach’ activities the nature of the coaching changed with time. Initially, the support provided was substantial. As the beneficiaries of the coaching process strengthened their own insights and capacities so the support provided was decreased, in accord with the ‘scaffolding’ and ‘fading’ notions of the cognitive apprenticeship model described by Collins, Brown and Newman (1989).

Identifying and dealing with programme-level matters
All coaching conversations, discussion and dialogue involved filtering out comments relating to
themes other than those germane at that particular session. Many of the filtered comments concerned programme-level matters: that is, issues and themes relating to the administration and overall conduct of the GDLP rather than any particular course within it. These were identified and recorded for later attention. For example, a range of matters relating to communication with students, assessment of courses, and overall look and feel of the programme website were identified in this way.
Many of these details were then fed back to appropriate LW staff for action. Others were tabled at one of the three ‘project and programme-level’ strategy workshops held during the project. These workshops lasted half-a-day, and were an opportunity for group discussions and clarification of group values, purposes and priorities. All LW academic and support staff and the two educational consultants were invited to these sessions.

The first workshop, held at the commencement of the project, provided an opportunity for everyone to develop an overview of the project, learn about the purpose and approach and for LW and ADU staff to meet one another. The second and third meetings, held later in the project, focussed on a review of assessment practice and strategic/business planning issues.

**Observations and reflections on the experience**

The educational development project described here sought not to provide an instructional design service but, rather, to enhance local-area capacity to draw on instructional design concepts. Further, it sought to strengthen local ability to sustain a continuous approach to curriculum renewal. Quality of the student learning experience was maintained by:

- acquiring, interpreting and acting on student feedback in a timely way;
- developing and engaging in a group or peer ‘review’ process of programme redesign and teaching review; and
- using external facilitation by educational development staff to initiate, prove and help embed these two processes in the first instance.

A sustained commitment to an evidence-based approach to course redesign and redevelopment was achieved. A simple but robust system for collecting student feedback in a timely way enabled a ‘rapid proto-typing’ approach to curriculum evolution within a given course. Our experience suggests that the use of an internal consultant working as a ‘coach’ (and supported by an appropriate ‘coach the coach’ process) is a cost-effective means to support the demands to interpret student feedback and rethink curriculum.

Cyclically acquiring, interpreting and acting on student feedback enabled the transition to a successful technology-mediated curriculum to be achieved over just three or four iterations of course design, development and implementation. Given the magnitude of the conceptual change demanded of teachers undertaking such ventures, we suggest this is a very reasonable number of re-development cycles.

**The role of team and group approaches to curriculum redesign**

Prior to the commencement of this project, instructors who were rethinking curricula and undertaking course development did not necessarily work in a group or team-based fashion. Usually, courses have been taught by one (sometimes two) instructors and, subject to meeting law profession requirements and expectations, course development proceeded within the relatively private domain of the relevant individual(s).

Our experience also indicates that, with the transition to a technology-mediated study programme, the curriculum design and development process increasingly involved more and more people. Discussion and dialogue played a central role. Discussion between a range of different players: between different instructors; between instructors and CEDAM consultants; between instructors and support staff responsible for management of student administration data; and between instructors, technical staff and CEDAM consultants. The systematic use of discussion and dialogue in this way is
in accord with others’ experiences and widely reported in the literature (eg. Schön, 1990; Brockbank & McGill, 1998). Schön’s concept of reflection-in-action, in particular, has informed much of the discussion and dialogue that was at the heart of the interaction between CEDAM consultants and LW participants.

“You can’t get whole programmes to change without this level of commitment. Individual courses can be changed in a comparatively straightforward way. Whole-of-programme change of this sort needs a different approach – for example, the one described here.” (Director, LW, 2002)

Toward the end of the project, the consolidation of team-based approaches to support the process of course design and development was happening in an increasingly explicit and autonomous fashion. Independent of any CEDAM input, these initiatives appeared almost as a response to a ‘facilitation vacuum’ left as CEDAM involvement diminished. Embryonic, self-organising groups of two or three individuals, for example, were embarking on at least two different course designs and development initiatives at the close of the project. Team approaches may prove to be a key component of the emerging ‘course development culture’ as experience mounts with the iterative process of rethinking curriculum associated with technology-mediated course design, development and provision.

“The common interest in WebCT has given us a context in which to talk more about our individuals courses and identify group issues. A good atmosphere is developing involving showing what you can do and sharing options, with people readily adapting approaches from someone else’s course and applying it to their own. Inevitably, approaches are put together in different ways in different courses – in ways suited to each context.” (Director, LW, 2002).

Some broader considerations for academic development units (ADUs)

Despite a prevailing ethos of commitment to and professionalism in teaching, many if not most academics now experience increasingly constrained opportunities for reflection and considered continuous improvement to course design and development. The opportunity to engage in structured workshop programmes of the form traditionally offered by academic (or educational) development units is likewise significantly compromised. In such circumstances ADUs need to look for opportunities to model more effective approaches. Boud (1999, p. 9) argues that staff development initiatives should be located “in the context of academic work”. Shifting an entire study programme to flexible mode (such as the GDLP) requires working with teams, and with the entire group of staff involved. The onus was on the consultants to model appropriate flexibility and timely responses. JIT rather than JIC approaches of the sort described here offered one way to tackle these challenges.

Despite the successes achieved in this project many issues and questions remain. Initiating and sustaining an appropriately paced process of continual change and informed curriculum evolution is a crucial issue. A key question concerns the extent to which it proves necessary (or not) to continue to provide external consulting support. Other important questions include: How flexible should a course be? Is there a danger of trying to make a course too many things to too many people? How much change can individuals sustain on an-going basis? What is an appropriate balance between consistency and change? What are realistic and sustainable timescales for change at course, programme and institutional levels? These are important questions for ADUs to consider as universities continue to experience pressures for change.
References


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