Learning and Teaching Investment Fund 2011 – Special Round

Final Project Report

Submission date: 20 February 2012
Title of project: Professional learning networks: an exploratory study to connect people - spaces - technology

Strategic objective(s) addressed:

Connected and Global - transforming the academic workforce through enhancements to program and curriculum design, learning spaces and educational practices.

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Project team members:

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<th>Name</th>
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Appendix 2 – Teaching Staff Improvement Plan Reports Error! Bookmark not defined.
1. Executive summary

RMIT has made a significant investment in the development and refurbishment of formal teaching spaces and e-learning systems. This investment offers teaching staff the opportunity to design and deliver curricula in new and creative ways. For L&T support functions the challenge is to ensure teaching staff have the confidence and capability to use these physical and virtual learning environments to produce tangible and sustainable improvements in student experience, improved learning outcomes and higher levels of student satisfaction.

This pilot study focussed on the teaching practices of three academic staff delivering courses in separate newly (re)developed technology intensive teaching spaces. Class observations and interviews were used to understand the way that teaching space, e-learning technologies and the orientations of staff and students to learning impacted on the qualities of the learning environment. As an outcome of the project, the teaching staff have been provided with a report outlining a range of possible ‘entry points’ from which they can develop strategies to improve their teaching practice. Guided by the principles of action research, these reports are designed to assist each staff member to improve the student learning experience in the next (and subsequent) cycles of course delivery.

In addition to teaching staff and students the study also examined the views and perceptions of a range of staff involved in the design and management of learning space and e-learning technologies as well as staff from academic/professional development functions. This enabled the study to extend beyond local teaching practices to include the views and perceptions of staff involved in supporting various aspects of the curriculum development and innovation process. The analysis the views and perceptions of this group provides a useful insight into orientations and relationships within the support staff constituency and between support staff and teaching staff at the ‘coalface’.

The model of innovation that has informed both the project design and analysis of data has been drawn from Actor Network Theory. From an ANT perspective, the qualities of the learning environment in the three courses involved have been viewed as an assemblage of socio-material entities and relations. Rather than defining the learning environment as a ‘social network’, ANT takes the view that all learning environments are ‘heterogeneous networks’ made up of teachers, students, tutors, support staff, classrooms, computers, course guides, standards, textbooks, surveys timetables, policies etc. In doing so, the study points to the potential contribution that ANT can make to understanding how professional development can best support curriculum change and innovation in practice.
2. A list of outcomes

The project, funded through the LTIF ‘Special Round’ in June 2011, was designed to examine the provision of professional development in three courses offered in new / refurbished learning spaces during semester 2, 2011. The study emerged from conversations with staff teaching in number of new learning spaces. They reported a lack of confidence and capability in making effective use of the learning spaces and e-learning technologies. In addition, while interested in ‘planned’ professional development activities, they also articulated a need to access advice and support in ‘real time’ during the teaching period.

In addressing this issue, the pilot study has produced a number of outcomes. These include:

- **For Teaching Staff**: A rich description of course design and delivery in 3 courses offered in newly developed learning spaces. These descriptions were based on interviews with teaching staff and students as well as class observations. The analysis of this data has provided the teaching staff with range of possible ‘entry points’ around which strategies to improve their teaching practice and the quality of the learning environment for their students can proceed.

- **For L&T Support Staff**: The examination of the roles of a range of staff supporting e-learning technologies and learning space design and management as well as staff from a range of curriculum development support functions were also incorporated into the study. The analysis of the views and perceptions of this group provides a picture of the orientations and the nature of the relationships between support staff and the teaching staff at the ‘coalface’.

At this point, the study has focussed on the collection and analysis of data for improving the design, delivery and support of teaching practice. Papers for conferences or journals are planned and it is anticipated that they will be produced during 2012.

3. Project outcomes and impacts

As stated in Section 2, the project was designed to examine professional development for staff teaching in new or refurbished learning spaces. This section offers a more detailed description of conceptual and methodological frameworks that guided the design and execution of the project.

i) **Overall Model of Professional Development**

A key challenge for, and outcome of, the project was to design a model of professional development that addressed the following criteria:

- Responds in ‘real time’ to teaching staff on a ‘just-in-time’ and ‘just-for-me’ basis.
- Supports collaboration between teaching staff and L&T support staff
- Creates opportunities for immediate and ongoing learning and improvement in curriculum design and delivery at program and course levels.

The model developed was adapted from Checkland and Holwell’s (1998) Framework + Methodology + Area-of-Concern (FMA) model of action research. The steps and task descriptions included in the model are summarised in in Figure 1, below.
ii) Application of Actor Network Theory

A second component of the study that has proven an interesting, and arguably important, is the application of Actor Network Theory (ANT) (Latour, 1999; Fenwick & Edwards, 2010). Through key concepts including ‘heterogeneous assemblages’, ‘translation’, ‘symmetry’ and ‘multiplicity’, ANT offers a model of innovation that has direct relevance to the mobilisation and institutionalisation of an effective professional development system.

In relation to educational settings, in general, and the courses involved in this study, in particular, the ANT perspective asserts that the qualities, both described and enacted, of any learning environment are co-produced by a unique assemblage of socio-material entities and relationships; these include teachers, students, tutors, administrators, educational developers, classrooms, computers, standards, course guides, software, text books, surveys timetables, policies etc. In doing so, ANT offers a way to understand how curriculum change and innovation occurs in practice and, by implication, how effective intervention strategies can be developed to produce tangible and sustainable improvements in student learning outcomes.

ANT views the implementation of change and innovation, be it a strategy, policy or a project, as a process concerned with mobilising and stabilising a ‘heterogeneous network’ of people (humans) and materials (non-humans). It offers a clear alternative to concepts of ‘social networks’ and ‘social diffusion’. In contrast to ANT, these models view change and innovation as a social process that is driven by the inherent qualities of the strategy, policy or project (ie it’s a good idea) and typically through the impetus of an authoritarian source (ie we know what’s best).
iii) The Curriculum Development and Improvement Cycle

As stated in Section 3, the project outcomes included both descriptive and developmental components. The execution of the study has been largely focussed on the descriptive aspects associated with the collection of data during the July-October teaching period and the subsequent analysis between October 2011 and January 2012. In terms of the action research model, this represents ‘Cycle 1’ of the project – refer to Figure 2, below.

A key outcome of the project will be the distribution of reports to teaching and support staff. Draft reports to teaching staff are included in Appendix 2 with final reports will be completed by the end of February 2012. This will provide participants the opportunity to develop improvement plans between February and August 2012, in readiness for implementation of ‘Cycle 2’ in the semester 2, 2012 teaching period.

- Describe briefly any issues that may have prevented you achieving all the original outcomes stated in the application.

It was envisaged that in Cycle 1 of the study interviews with all teaching and support staff would have been completed in early semester 2, 2011. In addition, all participants would have been enrolled and participating in the ‘Yammer’ forum around the same time. These steps were a pre-condition for the planned developmental components of the research design model (refer to Figure 1), specifically the short component (immediate actions). Because the initial interviews were delayed by ethics approval and technical issues prevented the effective enrolment of participating staff in the Yammer forum, the project did...
not achieve the planned objective of establishing a peer network to address ‘real time’ issues of teaching staff during the semester 2, 2011 teaching period (ie during Cycle 1).

However, the distribution of the reports to teaching and support staff and follow up by SEH ADG to provide or broker support to assist teaching staff to design and implement improvement plans. In addition, the SEH College has been successful in obtaining 2012 LTIF grant for a follow up project. This will provide the basis on which the work of the pilot study can be continued and extended during the 2012 teaching periods.

- **Describe any disciplinary and interdisciplinary linkages that have emerged as a result of the project.**

An objective of the study was to build inter-disciplinary linkages between teaching staff and support staff involved with IT, learning spaces and academic development. As discussed above, the study did not meet the planned objective of developing a collaborative peer learning network during Cycle 1 of the study. As outlined above, this will form part of the dissemination process in the lead up to delivery in the Semester 2, 2012 teaching period – Cycle 2. The LTIF grant will provide resources to continue and extend the pilot study.

**References**

4. **Dissemination strategies and outputs**

i) **Information Provision**

- **Individual reports for teaching staff – in progress**
  Interviews with each participating teacher and their students as well as the class observations have been analysed and reports will be completed by the end of February. The primary objective of the report is to present the staff member with the range of issues emerging from the data and which can be used as the basis on which course improvement plans can be developed and implemented.

- **Report for support staff – in progress**
  The report for support staff will have two primary objectives.
  1. Analysis of the data obtained from support staff as well as the main issues emerging from the analysis of the data from the teaching participants and their students. This will be
  2. Frame the features of an approach to professional development based on the processes of Action Research and Actor Network Theory.
ii) Engaged-focussed Dissemination

The reports are designed to provide a basis on which teaching staff and support staff can work together to improve the timeliness and relevance of advice and support to support the improvement of student learning outcomes and the quality of the learning environment. Tangible support from this process will occur through the LTIF funded project.

The dissemination strategies outlined below have been informed by the OLT / ALTC dissemination framework of information provision (reports, websites, publications) and engaged-focussed strategies (consultation, collaboration, and support for ongoing dissemination during and after the project is completed).

5. Evaluation of project outcomes

The questions addressed in this section include:

- What processes were planned and what were actually put in place?
- To what extent have the intended outcomes been achieved?
- Were there any variations from the processes initially proposed, and if so, why?
- What factors helped or hindered in the achievement of the outcomes?
- What measures have been put in place to promote the sustainability of the project’s focus and outcomes?

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<tr>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Planned Project Outcomes</th>
<th>Achieved</th>
<th>Notes / Variations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June – August 2011</td>
<td>proposal submitted and approved</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>research Assistant appointed</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ethics application submitted and approved</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Ethics approval was planned for the beginning of semester 2. The delay to August restricted the ability to engage the teaching staff with support staff during the semester. Consequently the opportunity to to test the relevance of the short cycle response feedback did not occur as planned.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>participants confirmed; informed consent gained; interview 1 and class observations arranged with teaching staff; Yammer forum established and staff enrolled; student group interviews arranged</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>September-October</td>
<td>interview 1 with teaching staff conducted, transcribed and returned for review; class observations conducted and transcribed; student focus groups conducted and transcribed; interviews with support staff arranged; initiate posts and encourage participants to contribute;; interview 2 with</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>Participants were not contributing to Yammer due to access problems. ITS was contacted for advice the problems were not resolved. Class observations recorded teachers audio but not the responses from students. This significantly limited the potential benefit of the class observations to the study.</td>
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<td>Month</td>
<td>Planned Project Outcomes</td>
<td>Achieved</td>
<td>Notes / Variations</td>
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<td>November-December</td>
<td>teaching staff organised; literature review and collation of background data initiated; interview 2 with teaching staff arranged</td>
<td></td>
<td>To improve the depth and rigour of the data analysis, additional funding was sought, and approved. The Centre for Social and Applied Research were engaged to complete the analysis.</td>
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<td>January-February 2012</td>
<td>data processing and topic coding initiated; interviews with support staff completed and returned for review; interview 2 with teaching staff conducted and returned for review; CASR begin analytic coding of all interview and observation data</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>CASR complete analytic coding of data</td>
<td>yes</td>
<td>In progress.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>individual reports prepared for participating teaching staff; summary report for support staff prepared and distributed</td>
<td>no</td>
<td>Teaching Staff: The report to teaching staff will focus on providing a range of course improvement options. The SEH College ADG will be available to provide advice and/or support. In addition, the College has been funded to continue the development of a peer led network for learning spaces during 2012. Support Staff: The report to support staff will provide use the Actor Network framework to provide insight into a range of professional development interventions to support staff in the effective use of learning spaces and e-learning technologies.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Complete and submit final project acquittal report</td>
<td>yes</td>
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6. Budget report
   - What was the amount of funds approved?
     
     $18,000
     $2,160 (additional funding approved 22/11/11)
     Total $20,160

   - What was the final amount of funds acquitted? Please attach a financial statement.

     Total $20,698
7. Appendices

Appendix 1 - Financial report
Appendix 2 – Teachings staff improvement plan reports - DRAFT
    1. Andrew Jennings
    2. Michael Nott
    3. Peter Daivis