

Bay of Plenty Polytechnic: Staff development in a smaller institution

Smaller tertiary institutions often find it difficult to provide adequate training and support for teaching staff wishing to incorporate information and communications technologies (ICT) in their teaching. Bay of Plenty Polytechnic has adopted a tiered and shared approach to training that maximises training options for staff within available resources.

BAY OF PLENTY POLYTECHNIC could be seen as a model for the Tertiary Education Commission's regional strategy for the institutes of technology and polytechnics (ITP) sector. It offers a range of professional and vocational programmes targeting the needs of its local community. It has forged strong collaborative relationships with other educational providers in its region, as well as with industry and community groups, and it consistently generates a budget surplus.

However, with an annual enrolment of some 3,000 EFTS (students) and 330 FTE of staff, Bay of Plenty Polytechnic is one of the smaller regional ITPs. It lacks the scale to provide all the services that institutions two or three times its size can offer. As a result, it has to plan its provision of services and support with great care and try to get the optimum return from any such investment. The institution's development of e-learning is a case in point and particularly its approach to educating and supporting staff in their use of this teaching medium.

Bay of Plenty Polytechnic's first formal commitment was a very modest one. In 2002, one of the Polytechnic's Information Technology (IT) tutors was given one day a week to begin providing support and focus for some early e-learning developments. For the first couple of years these developments were fairly limited. As an 'urban' polytechnic operating largely from its city campuses, there was little initial enthusiasm for a significant growth in e-learning.

In 2005 the Polytechnic was involved in an eCapability needs analysis under the e-Learning Capability Development Fund programme. An outside consulting team worked alongside staff to arrive at a vision for flexible learning where the institution would seek to increase choices for students. This was to be achieved by the application of appropriate technology, the development of supportive infrastructure and organisational arrangements, support for staff employing these new teaching media and a clear set of strategic goals. The major recommendations of the report were incorporated into the Academic Strategy leading to the creation of the Pikiarero Teaching and Learning Development Centre. This is a small agency that brings together the Flexible Learning Advisor and a Flexible Learning Technician. The remainder of the team are staff involved in secondary-tertiary alignment, Māori learning and Poutiriako, the Certificate in Tertiary Teaching. A further e-learning support appointment has recently been established at the second campus.

As the Centre gains prominence in the organisation, the challenge is beginning to shift from generating expectations to satisfying them. One solution has been to co-opt the support and involvement of tutors already involved in e-learning. Having had an opportunity to develop teaching resources and explore technologies for their own courses, and to change their teaching processes, staff involved in current projects are now being encouraged to support others in their endeavours.

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Clear direction and leadership from the Polytechnic's managers, particularly the Director, Academic has placed a strong focus on e-learning and flexible learning in terms of the institution's future directions. Another way to maximise the benefit from limited resources has been to develop clear and transparent processes for identifying, selecting and resourcing e-learning projects. This process takes account of both the value of the project to the department or group submitting the proposal, and the benefits expected for the wider organisation.

This combination of tactics – looking for a multiplier effect wherever possible and applying clear guidelines on policy and practice – can be seen particularly clearly in the approach being taken to staff development for e-learning. The Pikiarero Teaching and Learning Development Centre is taking a tiered approach to this challenge, which combines responsive and proactive options. The first option, and often the most labour-intensive for the Centre, is to provide just-in-time, one-to-one advice and training for tutors already preparing e-learning material on the Polytechnic's Moodle platform. A second option involves a recurring cycle of workshops in Moodle and its application to teaching and learning. These courses bring staff together from across the institution to reflect on how they plan to use e-learning as well as training them in the technical requirements of the platform. A third option has been to work with whole department or programme teams in the planning and development of blended learning packages.

Current examples are programmes in real estate and road transport management where the respective teaching teams are working with the Pikiarero team to develop their e-learning programmes. These training opportunities are backed up by expectations that tutors will take advantage of them. For instance, the Pikiarero team requires that any tutors planning to include online discussion in their blended learning courses need to complete an online facilitation course developed for the eCapability Project. This course, another example of an efficient use of resources, was developed originally by Eastern Institute of Technology and GippsTAFE but has been modified for use by Bay of Plenty Polytechnic. A further training option offered to staff is an inter-institutional programme within the Tertiary Education Alliance (TEA) partnership. This course is based on the Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec) server, taught by staff from Bay of Plenty Polytechnic, Wintec and Western Institute of Technology at Taranaki and available to staff from these institutions.

This careful focusing of effort has been essential to allow the Flexible Learning Adviser to extend her efforts across the full range of strategic, management and operational challenges facing any institution as it becomes involved in e-learning. These challenges include strategic leadership of the e-learning programme as it expands across the institution's programmes; working with the IT section to provide a stable, up-to-date Moodle platform; oversight of helpdesk services for both staff and students; support for a number of community and industry liaison activities using Moodle; a planned roll-out of an ePortfolio; and a personal commitment to national and regional networks on e-learning and flexible learning.

Reflections

Selecting the right staff to champion e-learning or flexible learning will always be important. In a small institution, where one person will need to possess a wide range of strategic, technical, pedagogic and managerial skills, it will be absolutely crucial.

The leader of a small e-learning unit will always be vulnerable to competing institutional pressures and priorities. Having the support of the institutional leadership is, if anything, more critical to their success than to their counterparts running larger units in larger institutions.

Collaborative relationships across the sector are an essential part of assisting the capability of staff involved in e-learning and enhancing the capacity for discipline-specific teaching and staff development.