

Chapter 20

Sustainability through Staff Engagement: Applying a Community of Practice Model to Web 2.0 Academic Development Programmes

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ABSTRACT

In many third-level institutions the innovative potential of technology has not been fully recognised or exploited at a strategic organisational level or embedded in mainstream educational work processes at a micro level. The sustainable integration of effective e-learning practices into higher education establishments remains a major challenge. This chapter discusses the challenges of designing staff development programmes which support the integration of e-learning into higher education by (1) leveraging the affordances presented by Web 2.0 technologies, coupled with (2) utilising a community of practice model to provide a sustainable peer-driven framework to share, support and embed technology-mediated teaching and learning practices. The chapter presents a practical example how a model of staff engagement was implemented within an Irish university, and concludes with suggestions on how others may benefit in considering a similar approach.

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INTRODUCTION

Technology has the potential to be used in a wide range of ways to support learning. Web 2.0 tools such as blogs and wikis are becoming increasingly commonplace in personal and workplace environments (O'Reilly, 2005), providing richer technological learning spaces for staff and students in higher education. The collaborative nature of Web 2.0 tools, and their appropriation into contexts where learning is more than just an isolated and individual activity, represents a promising new direction in facilitating effective learning. A key challenge for institutions is to provide innovative staff development supports to encourage faculty adoption and innovation with these e-learning technologies.

The concept of communities of practice has generated interest as an approach that might be effectively utilised to foster a more sustainable model of staff development (Blackwell & Blackmore, 2003; Chalmers & Keown, 2006; Donnelly, 2008). It represents an approach to staff development that recognises the importance of the community and extends beyond the traditional 'talking-head', trainer-led instructional design model to consider a more effective form of 'legitimate peripheral participation' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) to encourage the integration of technology into daily teaching practice. Within this academic realm, groups of people within disciplinary boundaries or subject domains share an interest in their teaching activities, and learn how to do it better through their interactions with one another in communities and professional networks. Academic staff development programmes in higher education ignore this at their peril as 'learning is ubiquitous in ongoing activity, though often unrecognised as such' (Lave, 1993, p. 5).

This chapter explores whether staff participation in a peer-supported, community-driven group can foster sustainable embedding of effective teaching practices mediated through Web 2.0 technologies in practice. Developing upon previous

research on communities of practice undertaken within the Irish National Digital Learning Repository (NDLR) project, this chapter describes a 2008–2009 staff development initiative designed to work with existing communities at the National University of Ireland, Galway. By leveraging existing social structures, a staff development programme was designed and implemented by adapting the NDLR 3-Stage Community of Practice Model to support a network of staff with a shared interest of integrating Web 2.0 technology into the teaching and learning experience.

Initial evaluation results suggest that staff engagement can be effectively and sustainably supported through this community of practice (CoP) model. These findings represent a promising staff development approach towards sustainable, collaborative knowledge-sharing networks resulting in successful pedagogic experiences in embedding technology for the enhancement of teaching practice.

BACKGROUND

Academic Staff Development Approaches

Laurillard (2004) states that the difficulty of truly 'embedding' e-learning into everyday practice is undermined by poor leadership, lack of true innovation and lack of professional expertise. The organisation as a whole must enable and encourage the competence development of its individual members if it wants to strategically act in the field of e-learning-driven innovation. Staff development in higher education is typically supported at a distributed level at the college or faculty, and by central units such as Human Resource staff development and training service centres which have become increasingly prevalent in the last decade (often referred to as 'Centres for Teaching and Learning' or 'Educational Development Units' in Ireland and the UK) (Gosling, 2008).

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