CATLYSTS FOR CHANGE: A UNIVERSITY NETWORK FOR ADVANCING TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

Universities are currently being challenged to respond to a variety of educational, economic and technological changes. One of the most notable challenges is to respond to the impetus towards life long learning and flexible delivery of education. How then does one facilitate systematic change in the teaching and learning culture of a highly devolved research-intensive university?

In 1999, the University of Western Australia (UWA) responded to this dilemma by approving a project to form a Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL). One of the key priorities of CATL has been to establish and coordinate a University Network for Advancing Teaching and Learning. The Network consists of local appointees (CATLYSTS) within each of the six faculties who have a broad responsibility for promoting teaching and learning within their respective faculty and within the broader UWA community. This paper describes the establishment and coordination of the University Network for Advancing Teaching and Learning and the learning partnerships that have emerged as a result of this initiative.

Introduction
This paper describes the establishment and coordination of a University Network for Advancing Teaching and Learning at the University of Western Australia (UWA). This cross-faculty network aims to provide a focal point for the promotion of teaching and learning within each faculty and within the broader UWA community. A number of learning partnerships that are actively associated with both professional development and research have emerged since the establishment of the Network.

**Background**

Universities are currently being challenged to respond to a variety of educational, economic and technological changes. Bates (2000, p. 8) identifies three aspects of these changes in universities: “the need to do more with less, the changing learning needs of society, and the impact of new technologies on teaching and learning”. Implementing change on the basis of pedagogical need is becoming increasingly difficult in this climate of financial constraint and pressure to expand our horizon to the global market place.

One of the most notable challenges facing universities is to respond to the impetus towards lifelong learning and flexible delivery of education. There has been a growth in the number of students continuing on to higher education after completing secondary school or returning to tertiary studies once in the workforce. There are also many more part time and mature age students enrolling in university courses across Australia than in previous generations. To help meet the needs of students requiring increasing flexibility in terms of time, place and mode of study there has also been a steady growth in the number of online courses with a higher profile being given by management to the development of such programs. How then does one facilitate systematic change in the teaching and learning culture of a highly devolved research-intensive
university? In 1999, UWA responded to this dilemma by approving a project to form the Centre for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning (CATL).

In early 2000 a Coordinator was appointed and CATL was established as part of the Organisational and Staff Development Services (OSDS) at UWA. Its brief was to provide a focal point for bringing together and for expanding the broad range of teaching innovations and staff development activities currently directed towards providing the highest quality learning opportunities possible for students. CATL aims to encourage and assist staff with the development and evaluation of faculty-based initiatives and to facilitate the effective University-wide application of skills and resources developed locally.

**Theoretical framework**

Rogers describes an innovation as “an idea, practice or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption … the perceived newness of the idea for the individual determines his or her reaction to it. If the idea seems new to the individual, it is an innovation” (Rogers, 1995, p. 11). For many academic staff at UWA the concept of flexible teaching and learning is a new one; for them it is an “innovation”. As such, a high level of uncertainty accompanies flexible teaching and learning at UWA. Common questions asked include “Why is UWA adopting flexible teaching and learning?”, “What is flexible teaching and learning anyway?”, “What does the University expect of its academics in this area?” and “Who can help us (academics) with it?”

How consistently and rapidly an innovation is adopted by an individual or organisation is dependent on a number of factors including the perceived value of the innovation, its consistency with existing values and past experiences, the perceived level of difficulty in
understanding and using the innovation, how observable the results are to others and the degree to which the innovation may be experimented with on a limited basis (Rogers, 1995). In the past, staff at UWA have been unsure of the value of flexible teaching and learning in promoting greater effectiveness in student learning. Teaching itself has not been perceived by staff to be as important for the purpose of tenure or promotion as research so they have sometimes experienced a conflict of interest between researching their discipline and being effective teachers. Flexible teaching and learning, particularly aspects that involve new technology, were perceived as not only difficult to understand and use, but also demanding an investment of time and money that was not readily available. The establishment of CATL was an initiative to support change in the way teaching and learning is organised and managed at UWA, and to recognise endeavours to enhance the relationship between academic staff and students. The importance of such strategic initiatives in successfully implementing change at the institutional level is well documented (Bates, 2000; Chalmers, 1999).

Diffusion of an innovation is a very social process that depends heavily on the experience of near peers. As Rogers (1995) notes “for some individuals, and for some innovations, the trial of a new idea by a peer like themselves can substitute, at least in part, for their own trial of an innovation” (p. 171). The more that both the individual that has knowledge of an innovation and the other individual that does not have experience of the innovation have in common the more effective is the communication that occurs.

The CATLyst Network

In order to promote a consistent and effective adoption of flexible teaching and learning, one of the key priorities of CATL was to establish and coordinate a University Network for Flexible
Teaching and Learning. The Network consists of local appointees (CATLysts) within each of the six faculties who have broad responsibility for promoting teaching and learning within their faculty. CATLysts also work with others within the Network to promote teaching and learning within the broader UWA community. Their role involves both individual consultation with staff, participation in special projects and membership of various faculty committees. CATLysts are expected to work 0.5 of a week on these responsibilities, and to give an equal amount of that time to the role within the Faculty and in the broader UWA community. The CATLysts meet regularly as a group with the Centre Coordinator. Both the frequency of these Network meetings and the functional size of the group (six plus Coordinator) have been conducive towards the achievement of positive outcomes.

While authoritative decisions about innovations generally lead to faster adoption within the organisation, they may be circumvented during implementation. As a result, CATL considered it important to have the faculties identify suitable CATLysts from within their ranks rather than have them appointed centrally. The Coordinator of CATL did draw up a job description and selection criteria to guide the faculties in their choice but the final decision was left with the faculty.

The original intention of CATL was to have academic staff who were currently involved in using flexible teaching and learning with their students as CATLysts. The Network that emerged, however, was far more diverse, presenting a range of challenges as well as strengths for the partnerships that emerged, and for CATL as the coordinating body.

The Network members were already full-time employees of the University prior to their selection as CATLysts. Of the six people appointed, two were academic staff who were already
involved in using flexible teaching and learning with their students. A further two CATLysts were instructional designers within their faculties. The fifth CATLyst was a project officer in a faculty-based multimedia unit and the final CATLyst was a research fellow in a faculty research centre. Five of the six CATLysts and the Coordinator were females.

The CATLysts’ range of experience and knowledge about flexible teaching and learning varied greatly. Three of the CATLysts were responsible for promoting faculty-based online managed learning environments (MLEs) – one commercial and the other two developed within their particular faculty, in one case by the CATLyst themself (UWA has not adopted an “official” online MLE). Two had a strong background in print-based distance education environments and were on a steep learning curve regarding online learning. One CATLyst had very little knowledge about flexible teaching and learning and initially felt “out of their depth” (personal communication, 2000).

Two of the CATLysts were also members of different faculty-based multimedia units (one a director and the other a project officer) and strong competition already existed between them as each of their units vied for “customers” amongst academic staff. Each multimedia unit has quite a different philosophy of teaching and learning which also created potential for conflict.

At the first meeting of the Network, the CATL Coordinator discussed the aims of the Network and the roles of the CATLysts. Potential concerns, conflicts and challenges were also raised by the Coordinator and discussed by the group. For example, one concern and potential conflict was the issue of institutional support for a specific online MLE. The University has not adopted a centrally supported MLE. Two faculty based MLEs (“Jellyfish” and the “Forum”) had been developed in the University and adopted by some faculties and staff while WebCT has been
chosen by another faculty and by the Library. Initially, there was considerable concern in the group that CATL would make a unilateral recommendation that only one MLE be used and each “MLE promoter” was concerned to have his or her MLE adopted as the “official version”. After considerable discussion, the group realised that each MLE provided its own strengths and challenges for academic staff. It was decided to promote all three to allow greater flexibility for academic staff. In recent months interest in WebCT has increased across the University. Because of the cooperation and collaboration that had already been established amongst members of the Network an unlimited WebCT licence has been acquired for the use of this software at an institutional level without other MLE providers being threatened by such a move (Thompson, Dook and Chivers, 2001).

**Network activities**

The CATL coordinates the Network and its activities to promote teaching and learning within the broader UWA community. One example of this is the faculty-based CATL Roadshows. The CATL Roadshows provide academic staff with a brief overview of flexible teaching and learning, what it is and how it fits into the teaching and learning environment of the University. They provide an opportunity to showcase best practice and inform staff of the support available for initiatives in teaching and learning. Workshops that lack context specificity “are in danger of appearing irrelevant” (Ferman & Page, 2000, p. 324). Consequently the aim of each Roadshow is to have a particular theme that is relevant to the faculty. Each CATLyst is responsible for coordinating the Roadshow for their faculty but are supported in this by the advice and participation of other CATLysts. For example, the CATLyst for the Faculty of Agriculture identified the need to raise the awareness of staff to the range of MLEs available to them and with a particular focus on systems that enabled them to display imagery of plant cells and the
like online. The program for the Agriculture Roadshow was therefore developed around that identified need. In contrast, the CATLyst for the Faculty of Arts, where many staff are already familiar with their “Forum” software, developed the Roadshow program around the theme of resources, possibilities and evaluation of online teaching and learning.

The establishment of CATL and the appointment of the CATLysts have provided a forum for the sharing of information about teaching and learning policy and procedures in the separate faculty areas of the University. For example, the experiences of one faculty following their adoption of WebCT as a MLE are now being considered in other sectors at UWA. Consequently organisational change is occurring, such as a larger and more reliable central server being provided to meet the needs of all staff wishing to use WebCT in their teaching. Greater collaboration and less duplication are also emerging. For example, because of the highly devolved nature of the University and its services, one faculty had computer laboratories with “state-of-the-art” computers and excellent technical support but no WebCT professional development staff. Another faculty had professional development staff but no computer laboratories. Discussion between the two faculty CATLysts has resulted in an improved and expanded WebCT professional development program which is facilitated through CATL and open to the wider University community.

CATL seeks to support and contribute to strategic planning, policy formation and implementation that promotes effective teaching and learning at department, faculty and University levels. The appointment of a faculty CATLyst benefits the faculties by providing a focal point for the promotion of teaching and learning and for the coordination of flexible delivery initiatives within the faculty. CATLysts make a substantial contribution to teacher development and new initiatives in the faculty as well as contributing to the development of
faculty policy and strategic planning in the area of teaching and learning. CATLysts also provide input at a University-wide level. This was evident when three CATLysts were asked to participate in a recent working party called to consider and respond to Kim Beasley’s education policy speech "The University of Australia Online" (24 January 2001). CATLysts participate in the staff development program offering workshops within their area of expertise (e.g., assessment, evaluation, the development of learning guides). They also provide feedback to central committees, such as the Teaching and Learning Committee and the IT Policy Committee, about issues of concern in the area of flexible teaching and learning (e.g., intellectual property, copyright). CATLysts are also used as an advisory body for special projects (e.g., a DETYA-funded disability and inclusive delivery project) as well as for off-campus developments (e.g., delivery of undergraduate education overseas).

Expertise from within the group is being made available for the benefit of the whole University. A suite of staff development workshops are being planned in which each CATLyst facilitates a workshop drawing on their specific knowledge and expertise. For example, one member of the Network will conduct a workshop on assessment. This person is also the assessment officer for their faculty and, coupled with the information gained from recent postgraduate studies in this area, is eminently qualified to facilitate such a professional development programme. In a second example, one of the CATLysts with a background in distance education is planning a workshop to assist academic staff to develop better quality print-based learning resources. A key element of this planning has been the design of a word processing template for lecturers to use in the preparation of teaching material. The template was initially developed for a special project but is now readily available to the whole University.

Through CATL, cross faculty and departmental collaboration is also now occurring in research
activities associated with the development and implementation of teaching and learning initiatives. Previously such research was ad hoc and localised. Both small ($10,000) and large ($50,000) grants are now available on an annual, competitive basis. They are designed to raise awareness about flexible teaching and learning, and to provide advice and support to academic staff who are interested in innovations in this aspect of their work. Project outcomes are shared and promulgated through the CATL and the CATLyst Network. Staff are also encouraged to report their research through publications and conference presentations, with recognition to be given in future considerations for appointment and promotion. Seminars and workshops are designed to provide opportunities for grant recipients to meet each other and to develop informal personal contacts or networks to encourage peer support.

**Conclusion**

Formal feedback and evaluation of the UWA Network initiative has not yet been undertaken. However, informal feedback indicates that the learning partnerships that have evolved between the CATLysts and the Centre Coordinator have laid a solid foundation for the continued promotion of best practice in teaching and learning both within the faculties and in the broader University community.
References


