

Getting started in flexible learning: Perceptions from an online professional development workshop

Julia Hallas

Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

julia.hallas@aut.ac.nz

***Abstract:** This paper reports on an evaluation of the effectiveness of an online professional development workshop for university academics new to online learning and teaching. The online Communication and E-moderation workshop takes an authentic approach to professional development. Offering opportunities for rich learning experiences, academics are supported in adapting research and integrating discussion effectively into their online courses. Participants' learning was assessed in the context of practice, critical evaluation and reflection. Overall, the evaluation shows that workshop was beneficial for academic staff who wished to develop skills in discussion and e-moderation for online learning and teaching. Participants who finished all stages of the workshop achieve in all areas of the learning outcomes.*

***Keywords:** professional development, online learning, collaborative learning*

Background

Introduced as a University-wide initiative in 2003, the Blackboard Learning Management System is new to a majority of staff at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). Four introductory professional development workshops have been designed specifically for academic staff new to learning and teaching in an online environment. Each of the following workshops complement each other: 'Online Interaction', 'Course Building', 'Communication and E-moderation' and 'Online Assessment'. The workshops are part of the Flexible Learning programme, run by the Centre for Educational and Professional Development (CEPD). The centre is AUT's in-house professional development centre for academic staff, with responsibility for teaching the Blackboard Learning Management System alongside online learning pedagogy.

Communication and E-moderation workshop

The workshop 'Communication and E-moderation', is the focus of this paper and is run fully online over a 3-week period in order to provide authentic learning experiences for participants. Academics are supported in order to learn and experience the Blackboard Learning Management System while critically examining and evaluating Salmon's (2000) CMC (computer mediated conferencing) model for learning and teaching online. In terms of the 'Diffusion of Innovations' model (Rogers, 1995), target participants (academic staff) were initially early adopters and are now late majority users. A majority of participants had no experience of learning or teaching in an online learning environment and many needed to build confidence and skills in using computer technology.

Workshop design

While online discussion can be effective, it can be difficult to do well (McFadzean & McKenzie, 2001). The workshop aims to foster a research approach to improving learning and teaching, by empowering academics with a pedagogically sound asynchronous discussion model they can implement themselves, without the need for a team of instructional designers.

The challenge was to design an authentic approach to professional development by offering opportunities for rich learning experiences, while supporting academics in adapting research and integrating discussion effectively into their online teaching approaches. To help academics make pedagogically sound connections between Blackboard technology and adult online learning practice (Errington, 2001), the workshop was designed to demonstrate how to support collaborative processes between learners, rather than taking a 'communication of information' approach (McFadzean & McKenzie, 2001).

The workshop uses two theoretical models concurrently. The learning experiences have been designed around each of the five stages of Salmon's (2000) CMC model. Within each stage, participants are required to complete tasks (based on the learning outcomes) which have been designed using Kolb's experience-based learning cycle (Kolb, 1984). This provides a partial constructivist and reflective approach for professional development.

Learning outcomes

1. Practice using the Blackboard discussion forum and other collaborative functions as they arise based on the tasks designed using Kolb's (1995) experiential based learning model.
Learning theory: Participants carry out tasks which require them to have an experience, reflect on it, discuss the experience with others and to develop their own ideas for course design. Participants experience learning that could not happen in a traditional face to face environment.
2. Critically evaluate Salmon's (2000) 5-stage Computer Mediated Conferencing model for learning and teaching online.
Learning theory: Participants experience the Computer Mediated Conferencing model by carrying out a range of tasks from each of the five stages. They are required to develop discussion and e-moderating skills, group work skills and reflective processes.
3. Reflect on experiences and evaluate the usefulness of the model for their own learning and teaching experiences.
Learning theory: An important aspect of this workshop is reflection. Participants are asked to reflect on their experiences of each of the tasks and in the evaluations. This type of reflective cycle helps participants to monitor their changing patterns of behaviour and thinking, enabling them to make their own connections about what and how they are learning (Walker, 2002).

Model of teaching and learning online through Computer Mediated Conferencing

Salmon's (2000) Computer Mediated Conferencing model is the result of analysing the content of approximately 3000 online messages over two years (Salmon, 2000). It attempts to address issues surrounding collaborative learning and how to encourage and maintain asynchronous online communication. The model is two-fold. Firstly, it demonstrates the stages students go through in order to become motivated, collaborative and active online contributors. Secondly, it demonstrates the process e-moderators (online teachers) need to perform in order to ensure successful online collaboration. The learning processes within the workshop have been designed to facilitate the critique of Salmon's (2000) Computer Mediated Conferencing model. At each stage, tasks have been designed to incorporate

each of the three learning outcomes; practice, critical evaluation and reflection. There are five stages to the model and examples of tasks from the workshop follow:

Stage 1: access and motivation

Tasks: facilitation of discussion forum, accessibility issues

Stage 2: online socialisation

Tasks: encouraging late starters and gaining confidence

Stage 3: information giving and receiving

Tasks: sharing learning and forming groups

Stage 4: knowledge construction

Tasks: e-moderating practice, exploring online interactive resources

Group task: design of online discussion activity

Stage 5: development

Tasks: case studies, evaluation of the Computer Mediated Conferencing model, design of a set of discussion tasks based on the Computer Mediated Conferencing model for own online course

Methodology

It is prudent to investigate academics' values, attitudes, perceptions and responses to change in order to encourage transformation in learning and teaching in higher education (Errington, 2001; Kirkpatrick, 2001; Walker, 2002). Therefore, evaluation instruments were chosen to explore insights into academics' perceptions of understanding their own experiences of online learning.

Analysis of communication and interaction in an online environment, provides rich sources of information regarding the effectiveness of online learning. In order to capture such information, evaluation was built into the workshop at the design stage (Clark, 2001), ensuring reflection was integrated into all of the workshop tasks. This allowed data to be collected even if participants did not finish the workshop and/or complete the evaluations.

Data collection

Quantitative and qualitative data was collected from four occurrences of the workshop. Quantitative data was used to determine the number of participants completing each stage of the workshop and to identify which stages were problematic in terms of participation.

Four qualitative instruments were used: stage 5 task, self-evaluation, workshop evaluation and email evaluation. In the stage 5 task, participants were asked to reflect on their workshop experiences, as well as Salmon's (2000) Computer Mediated Conferencing model and to outline a set of online discussion activities for a course. The self-evaluation was designed to provide reflective data about individual performance and performance within a group. The workshop evaluation was designed to provide data about the workshop and facilitation, for improvement purposes. Two months after participants had completed the workshop, they were asked via email what they were doing in their online courses which related to this staff development workshop. This was important in order to determine whether a transfer of learning had taken place.

Reflection

Reflection can foster deep approaches to understanding (Moon, 1999), therefore reflective practice is increasingly important to academics dealing with new modes of teaching as a tool for professional development.

Analysis of the data, illustrated that participants experienced the notions of ‘reflection-in-action’ and ‘reflection-on-action’ (Schon, 1987).

‘Reflection-in-action’ shows how “practitioners are able to describe how they ‘think on their feet’, and how they make use of a repertoire of images, metaphors and theories” (Smith, 2005, p. 12) In stages 1–4, participants took part in activities which were new to them and experienced the first level of reflection, ‘reflection-in-action’. The nature of the tasks threw participants into ‘doing’, and their expectations of the results were often not what they imagined. Participants were surprised, confused, even irritated at how learning unfolded in this new online situation. Feelings of being out of their comfort zone were common, requiring them to build new understandings for each unique situation. For example, the group task was based on stage 4 of Salmon’s (2000) Computer Mediated Conferencing model and on paper looked like it would work well. However in reality, the group task didn’t work well and participants were thrown into a tense situation, which they tried to make sense of by ‘thinking on their feet’, adopting various strategies as they struggled to make it work.

‘Reflection-on-action’ enables practitioners to explore why they acted as they did, in order to develop questions and ideas about their practice (Smith, 2005). The nature of the qualitative instruments provided evidence of participants working at the next level of reflection, ‘reflection-on-action’. Stage 5 task asked participants to write a set of activities based on Salmon’s (2000) 5-stage Computer Mediated Conferencing model, that they could use in their own online course. Responses showed participants drew upon the workshop experiences; what worked and what didn’t, how they reacted and why, why they thought others reacted as they did. Then they developed their own ideas about practice – what would and wouldn’t work in their own unique situations.

Analysis

Analysis of the data has been themed according to questions adapted from the ‘Reflective Cycle for Teacher Learning’ (Walker, 2002, p. 126). Each question is a trigger for reflection, followed by a statement regarding the relevance to the reflective cycle. These themes support the reflective cycle so that we may see participants’ deep thinking and broad reflections (Walker, 2002).

Evaluation and reflection

What do teachers think about the model?

New knowledge provides a stimulus for thinking about new things as well as current knowledge.

Generally, participants stated that the model was a useful starting point for the novice e-moderator. It was logical, well structured and clearly showed how teachers and students develop the confidence to work online. Practically, it provided guidelines and strategies for setting up discussion forums, student responsibilities and what to expect at each stage. Some participants said that the workshop and supplied readings made them want to find out more about e-moderating.

Many participants felt that it was not necessary to adopt the model in its entirety. All felt that stages 1 and 2 were most important for forming relationships, but needed to be set up well. Interestingly, participants who taught in undergraduate or graduate papers felt that it was not necessary to achieve stages 4 or 5. They felt that many undergraduate papers are exploratory and developmental and students would be unable to cope with stages 4 and 5, which required knowledge construction and independent learning.

"I would be very happy if my students reached stage 3 to exchange information and ideas with each other."

It would appear that expecting students to think critically seems to depend on the level participants are teaching at.

Many participants believed that the model accurately reflected their own experiences in the workshop, particularly getting stuck at stage 4, which involved group work. A majority of participants expressed their irritation, dissatisfaction and even anger at group members who did not complete this stage.

The statistics show clearly that it is at stage 4 (group work task) where significant numbers of participants begin to drop out, leading to fewer finishing stage 5.

The group work initially consisted of approximately 2-3 people which meant they became dysfunctional if one or two were late to start or dropped out. In subsequent workshop revisions, the participants were divided into larger groups of five to six people, which meant that there were enough to get on with the group task.

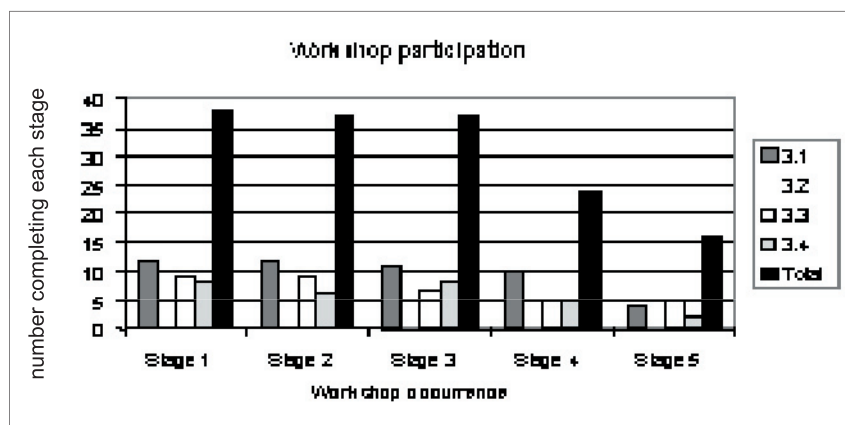


Table 1. number of participants in workshop occurrences 3.1, 3.2, 3.3, 3.4

Is teachers' thinking changing?

Metacognition provides self-evaluation and information for emotional support

The evaluation comments by participants did not necessarily show that their thinking is changing, however the self-evaluation questions provided reflection about independent and group learning processes which it is hoped will be useful for them when they design their own online courses.

"I had forgotten that for some people computer learning is a new process and stage one was a useful reminder."

The reflective comments showed that many participants liked to be in control or in charge of the tasks not only during group work, but even within the independent learning discussion forums. They commented about the lack of leadership, irritation at having to wait for responses from others and that some participants do not do their tasks correctly.

“Next time someone offers to do a job, I will log on and make sure they have done it and done it correctly.”

Participants were able to comment on their strengths, weaknesses and how they might improve their postings. Encouragingly, they also found it useful to read others comments and experiences.

“I had the opportunity to ponder, mull over my own thoughts, creating these through my writing but also in seeing the limited interpretations of my writings made by others.”

This comment made the facilitator rethink her responses to participants postings. She realised that sometimes there was not the time to think deeply about what a participant had written and would type a quick response such as ‘good points, thanks’. Is a quick response worse than none at all? Participant postings were often very deep and an adequate response from the facilitator required thoughtfulness and sometimes research to follow up.

Ways of communicating seem to be a factor in how the groups interact. One participant thought it was strange that a group member wanted them to phone each other. It was noticeable that when participants had technological problems, they emailed the facilitator privately rather than post what they didn’t know in the open discussion forum.

In one workshop, there was immense difficulty in getting three participants who worked in the same faculty, located in the same building, to complete their group work. They each complained online about being unable to contact each other within their group discussion forum. It was suggested that they phone and meet with each other. The facilitator supplied each of them with the phone extensions and office room numbers of each other, but for some reason they did not get together and instead completed the group work activities individually.

What are teachers learning in terms of their personal skills?

Personal skill learning gives information about what the teachers are learning

From the range of comments, the development of personal skills in the following main areas were ascertained

Course design to support students

Only one participant commented that they would prefer f2f teaching for the socialisation that occurs in the classroom. Others commented on the challenges they might face in designing their own online course and activities. It was felt that the process of setting up a course is as important as the content to be taught.

“Set up of the course is critical to each stage happening successfully. Whoever designs the course must consider the process that happens in each stage, icebreaking, setting up groups, etc.”

E-moderating skills

Participants felt they got good modelling from the workshop facilitator in terms of clear communication, prompt responses and weaving. Role modelling of asking small questions and prompting them further, along with ideas for managing their own discussions gave participants confidence in terms of what the model could do.

“I felt honoured and respected and humanely engaged with throughout.”

This is a reminder that engaging carefully with participants reinforces the facilitator's aim of making time to respond to all participants in a meaningful way.

Group interaction issues

The comments reinforced the notion of group work being problematic. In summary, participants found general lack of participation and group members being slow to complete tasks. In an attempt to encourage participants to complete the group work, they would be sent two reminders or 'do you need help' emails. However, generally there was no response.

Others found the opportunity to experience virtual groups useful and were not put off by difficulties. They were able to understand the issues they might face with their own classes. One participant observed:

"Just because we see students in a room does not really mean they are participating!"

Authentic learning activities

Participants stated that they enjoyed being a student "with all of its discomfort and frustrations." While some felt a f2f workshop would have been less work, they thought it was a good authentic learning experience and an effective way to facilitate the topic of online discussion and e-moderation. "Loved the case studies – provided real-life, interesting examples."

Time management

Participants felt they had learned about the time consuming nature of participating in discussion forums.

"Online is twice as time-consuming as f2f lecturing."

Access issues and use of the Blackboard Learning Management System

There were very few access issues. Usually just logging on for the first time, password problems etc, which participants needed to be stepped through by phone.

Participants felt that completing the workshop tasks made them familiar with the Blackboard Learning Management System and highlighted aspects they needed to be aware of when developing and teaching their own workshops.

"Doing the workshop meant I got to do fun bits like create a home page, join in discussion and get feedback from others – I got to learn how to use the system."

What are teachers doing in their online courses that relate to this staff development workshop?

Links to the classroom give a grounding in practice.

This question was asked of participants via email, two months after they had completed the workshop, in order to ascertain a transfer of learning to their own teaching environment.

Comments show that some participants are discussing online learning and participation with colleagues who were currently teaching online in order to get more information about practice before they jump into it themselves.

One participant commented that there is a definite reluctance by students to participate in online discussions, due to feeling uncomfortable about expressing their opinions. Another participant mentioned trialling various strategies to get students to participate independently and in groups.

“...I have learned from doing this workshop that stimulating and encouraging group discussion is not so easy to do.”

By doing the workshop, participants had confidence in using the Blackboard Learning Management System with their students. One participant mentioned they now had the ability to anticipate the non-participatory student and how to deal with them. Another said the workshop had reinforced the need for a structured introduction into online discussion.

What are teachers intending to do next?

Goal setting provides a link to action and what teachers intend doing next.

The question which generated the evaluation for this reflection, was to ask participants how useful they found the model for their own subject area, and to outline a set of online discussion tasks for a course they teach.

It was encouraging that a number of participants outlined in detail, tasks they would create for all five stages of the model for their subject area and then asked for feedback from others. Many participants felt the model raised a number of questions for them. They wanted to make their students first venture into online learning successful, therefore they would need to spend time exploring and thinking about creating a successful course before building it. Some even suggested they would pilot a small section of their course with their colleagues.

“I must ensure carefully considered processes and strategies. I want success in terms of student participation and student learning of content.”

Most of the participants discussed adapting the model. Some thought they would place more emphasis on stages 1 and 2 to encourage socialising. Others reflected on how the participants in this workshop coped with each stage and thought that they would pay more attention to stage 4, where our workshop participants faltered.

“I plan to spend a lot of time getting them to know each other, make it personal by posting photos... lots of build up to stage 3, where I will make it fun, familiar and not too challenging so students don't feel like there is a right or wrong answer.”

One participant pointed out that students might not necessarily work through the model in stages and they might go back and forth between the stages.

Another participant decided to add in mini steps for students not quite ready to move on and another thought there should be upside down steps to prepare students for technical skills, language and communication skills as well as understanding concepts of group work, etc.

A few participants felt that their students might struggle to get to stage 5 and wanted to know how we could extend their skills to do this. This comes back to the teaching of critical thinking skills. It would appear that participants are not making the connection between stages 4 and 5 and critical thinking.

What do participants think about the effectiveness of the facilitation?

This question was asked to evaluate the effectiveness of facilitation in order to determine teaching improvements. Participants were asked what they liked / disliked about the workshop and what enhanced / hindered their learning?

Encouragingly participants felt that the facilitation process modelled enhanced their learning and encouraged them to continue. They enjoyed the workshop, increased computing skills, gained access to new resource material and some mentioned that they are now developing an interest in online learning. In particular they liked having a timeline which listed deadlines for completing each stage of the workshop.

Pleasingly, it was not the facilitation which hindered participants learning, rather it was organisational and group facilitation problems. Common problems were finding time to participate, group members who did not participate, overcoming personal reluctance to participate and some thought the workshop was too short and should be longer.

“Having to overcome my reluctance to go with the flow and get involved.”

Conclusion

Participants found the Computer Mediated Conferencing model (Salmon, 2000) to be a useful starting point and upon reflection, many decided they would adapt the model to suit their own teaching styles. One participant summed this up by stating “the best models are those we construct for ourselves and as we grow and learn, our models change”. What is important, is what participants take as their own from the learning process.

The self-evaluation showed that participants gained an understanding of what it is like to be a student in an online learning environment, enabling them to consider the feelings of their students when designing their own online courses.

If each stage of Salmon’s (2000) Computer Mediated Conferencing model is carefully designed, it can work well. However it is clear that the e-moderator must maintain a constant and encouraging presence even when stage 5 is reached or the discussion momentum may vanish. Just as group work can be problematic in a f2f setting, in a faceless online environment it can create even greater difficulties. Even though Salmon (2000) promotes the model as supporting collaborative learning, it can be difficult to achieve successfully.

In general, the evaluation shows that the Communication and E-moderation workshop was beneficial for academic staff who wished to develop skills in discussion and e-moderation for online learning and teaching. Participants who finish the workshop achieve in all areas of the learning outcomes.

References

- Clark, R. E. (Ed.). (2001). Learning from media. Arguments, analysis, and evidence. Connecticut: Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Errington, E. P. (2001). The influence of teacher beliefs on flexible learning innovation in traditional university settings. In F. Lockwood & A. Gooley (Eds.), *Innovation in open & distance learning. Successful development of online and web-based learning* (pp. 27-37). London: Kogan Page.
- Kirkpatrick, D. (2001). Staff development for flexible learning. *The International Journal for Academic Development*, 6(2), 168-176.

- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, N J: Prentice-Hall.
- McFadzean, E., & McKenzie, J. (2001). Facilitating virtual learning groups: A practical approach. *Journal of Management Development*, 20(6), 470-494.
- Moon, J. (1999). *Learning journals. A handbook for academics, students and professional development*. UK: Kogan Page.
- Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations* (4th ed.). New York: The Free Press.
- Salmon, G. (2000). *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online*. London: Kogan Page.
- Schon, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. Retrieved 14 April, 2005, from <http://educ.queensu.ca/~ar/schon87.htm>
- Smith, M. K. (2005). *Donald Schon: learning, reflection and change*. Retrieved 14 April, 2005, from <http://www.infed.org/thinkers/ed-schol.htm>
- Walker, R. (2002). A reflective cycle for teacher learning: The Christchurch ICT cluster project. In G. Hoban (Ed.), *Teacher learning for educational change* (pp. 115-142). Buckingham: Open University Press.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the support of my colleague, Jennie Swann

Copyright © 2005 Julia Hallas. The author assigns to HERDSA and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive licence to HERDSA to publish this document in full on the World wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on CD-ROM and in printed form within the HERSA 2005 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.