A hybrid approach - The best of both worlds:
A narrative account of Griffith University's re-structuring of academic blended learning support and student literacy support

Abstract

Kevin H. Ashford-Rowe,
Griffith University, Brisbane, Australia, k.ashford-rowe@griffith.edu.au

Introduction

This abstract describes the approach adopted at Griffith University to the re-organisation of a range of services aimed at better supporting the academic community in the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in a blended approach to their teaching practise. It also briefly outlines the intention of seeking a more 'in-curriculum' focussed approach to the delivery of academic, information and IT literacy support to students.

Griffith University has long had a centralized and enterprise-wide approach to the provision of a range of academic and student support services, including the library, information and communication technology services. This includes the provision of academic and student enabling services such as, support to academic teachers in the integration of technology into existing face to face teaching practice and academic, information and information technology literacy support for students. At Griffith University, these services sit within a single Division of Information Services (INS), led by a PVC (Information Services).

What did we do? And, why?

Over the period 2007-8 the Learning and Teaching Executive of Griffith University increasingly began to challenge the central element (Flexible Learning and Access Services or FLAS), responsible for both training academics in the use of ICTs in education and building specific multimedia tools and resources, with finding better ways to support their demand for an increase in capacity building activity within the academic community, particularly, in the use of technology to enhance the student learning experience, thus enabling students to gain benefit from increased opportunities to access their learning content.

To that end, Griffith University developed a 'Blended Learning Strategy' in 2008 with the stated goal of, 'using ICTs to enhance learning and teaching activity at Griffith'.

Whilst there was some initial discussion about the role and value of a central unit and some consideration given to devolving some of the capability from the central entity and relocating it directly within the academic community, it was recognised that this would significantly weaken FLAS and put into question its ability to provide a range of the additional services that it provided and that were also well used throughout the University.

Thus a period of externally facilitated consultation was undertaken with a range of staff including senior members of the learning and teaching executive, as well as academics currently utilising the service and those professional staff working within FLAS. This consultation led to a decision to seek an alternative approach, one that would both better embed capability within the academic community, to build capacity, and at the same time maintain the advantages of having a centralised entity, consistent with Griffith's centralised service model. The crux of the matter; therefore, was to be able to embed educational technology design and support within Griffith's four Academic Groups, and, at the same time, continues to benefit from the advantages inherent in maintaining a centralised unit.

In order to seek to achieve both of these outcomes an approach was adopted, 'The hybrid approach' that sought to both retain the Central Unit, and embed academic support capability. This approach firstly led to the creation of four 'Blended Learning Advisor' (BLA) positions, one for each of Griffith's four Academic Groups. These new positions were co-funded by the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Academic) and the Pro Vice Chancellor (Information Services) for an initial two year period. Though they are professional, as opposed to academic, positions they were placed directly within the academic community were thus recruited from directly within the Academic Groups and line managed by the respective Deans Learning and Teaching of each of the Groups.

Whilst the delivery of these supporting services in this way was comparatively new to Griffith overall FLAS had trialled a similar embedded model to great success the previous year within the University's School of Public Health. This trial

had led to the realisation that in order to more effectively build capability and capacity within the academic community in the use of ICTs in the delivery of education, what needed to be addressed was both the requirement to manage cultural change, and the need to meet the actual 'training gap' in the use of such technologies as opposed to the 'perceived gap'.

What is a hybrid approach?

The notion of a 'hybrid approach' is by no means a new one, and certainly not unique to Griffith, in fact, anecdotal evidence alone suggests that many similar such approaches have been adopted across a range of tertiary institutions, either as a part of a planned approach, or because it has always been done in that way. However, what characterised the adoption of this approach from a Griffith perspective was the deliberate nature of it, and the fact that it allowed the University to very quickly move beyond the 'central vs. devolved or embedded' support model argument and arrive at a stage where we were able to set an expectation of obtaining the best of each approach. It also presented the opportunity to tailor services to meet the actual local need, as represented within the Academic Groups and to ensure that the lessons learned within one part of the academic community could be quickly taken and applied elsewhere. In addition, it meant that a perceived lack to academic uncertainty as to the role and services of the centralised entity could be reduced as the lines between the central and the devolved began to blur those boundaries.

Equally it has allowed for a realisation that maybe 'one size does not fit all' in terms of meeting the needs of academic colleagues, so more of a focus has been placed upon the provision of services tailored to local need as defined by the academic community, as opposed to the former reliance, to a large extent anyway, upon the provision of a more generic approach to training.

Where are we going with it? And, what have we achieved so far?

In addition to the establishment of the BLAs, INS also undertook a 're-shaping' activity over the period 2009 – 2010. This activity led to the opportunity of bringing those professional staff responsible for the delivery of academic literacy, information literacy and IT literacy support to students to sit within a single 'Learning and Teaching' portfolio situated within the Division of Information Services. At the same time, this portfolio, based partially upon the former FLAS, has itself re-shaped to ensure that it is able to provide a consistent set of capabilities and capacity to support each of the four Academic Groups.

To achieve this four separate group-based teams have been created, each vertically aligned to one of the four Academic Groups. These teams are each led by a Manager, and each is responsible for ensuring that the necessary supporting services are provided to the academic and student community within the Group that they support. At the same time, the four Managers are tasked with better integrating themselves within the Academic Group that they support, in particular, its learning and teaching governance, thus, looking to better ensure that the services provided out of the central area are coordinated with the activity of the BLA and consistent with the stated requirements of the Academic Groups themselves.

These four teams now employ the Educational Designers and multimedia creation specialists capable of building capacity in the academic community and also of designing and developing specific resources and tools on request, though it is noted that the latter role is increasingly at odds with the expectation of 'capacity building'. In addition, these teams now also employ the learning advisors and information literacy librarians, as well student IT trainers, which enables consideration to be given as to how these traditionally campus based and generic training roles can be better articulated into the context of the student's learning experience and thus be provided in a more, 'in curriculum' basis.

What has it given us? And, would we do it again?

The adoption of this 'hybrid approach' to the support of academic staff development in the use of ICTs appears, in the early stages anyway, to be yielding significant returns on the investment. Not the least of which is the fact that directly as a result of having a dedicated BLA employed, at least one of the Academic Groups has been able to significantly speed up its adoption of the use of classroom capture or lecture capture technology by its academic teachers in a relatively positive manner. This has been achieved in a context where support for the uptake and usage of this technology could not be considered to be universal, however, the opportunity of dedicating a trained and competent individual to providing the necessary training and preparing supporting materials has, it appears from early feedback, played a role in addressing many of the culture change matters that need to be overcome. In addition to this, is the fact that the processes and the cultural change lessons learnt, as well as the support material produced, can all be re-contextualised and re-deployed and re-used via the BLA, the central entity and the BLA network into other parts of the academic community.

In conclusion, the 'hybrid approach' as defined and utilised at Griffith does seem to be making a difference in perceptions and practices with regard to the use of ICTs in educational design and delivery. It would, however, be unwise to overstate the outcomes, and still less wise not to recognise the limited impact that one single appointment can have, often in a Group employing many hundreds of academic staff. That said a pattern does seem to be emerging where the BLAs are increasingly understanding the expressed, and sometimes not expressed, needs of their academic colleagues and seeking to champion those needs and demands back to the centralised entity. In that respect, it is providing a very useful avenue for establishing the actual requirements of our 'clients' in this area, as opposed to our perceptions as to

what they might be. They are also assisting us in breaking down some of the barriers to engagement by acting as the bridging point between the services that are required by the academic community and the central area that has the capacity to deliver them.

In addition to this, the inclusion of the roles traditionally identified with the provision of more generic support to students in academic literacies into a re-shaped centralised entity has meant that we have been able to better realise the synergies inherent when the professional learning and teaching staff are co-located, and at the same time better focus this activity more closely to the point of student need, that is, in the curriculum.

None of the above should convey any sense of the job being done at Griffith. At best we hope that we have put firm organisational structures in place that will provide us with foundations upon which we can build a better service provision. But it will be our early and on-going analysis of our metrics that will provide us with any evidence of success. But, what all of this does mean is that Griffith can continue to benefit from the advantages of having one central entity through which it can seek to implement strategic change, and not, in effect, find itself funding the establishment of four similar entities each of which could well be operating independently of one another within the institution.