Change Management Strategies When Undertaking eLearning Initiatives in Higher Education

Geoff Goolnik
Comfortable Learning, Educational Consultants

Abstract

Although technology enhanced learning has been advocated as one way of meeting student needs more effectively and efficiently, a challenge for university senior management is how best to facilitate this development. While studies in these areas have revealed that, in times of change, people management skills are of critical importance there is evidence from the literature that university leaders can be insensitive, taking little account of academic staff who are fearful of the transition to proposed changes in professional practices. Other research has suggested that successful implementation of plans are promoted by adopting more of a social deterministic approach, with the strategies clearly explained to academic staff so that the latter can understand the rationale and their new roles. The outcomes can empower staff and encourage participation, aligning individual motivations and concerns with organisational goals to develop engaging policies and practices.

Within education, the information age that was enabled by the Internet has now opened up significant competitive, commercial possibilities for Higher Education on the now vitally important global stage. It’s a move much applauded by governments and their quality assurance and funding agencies in the belief that these business-like areas of performability are an advantaged means of meeting student needs more effectively and efficiently and are far superior to the unbusiness-like ones – such as the discovery of truth – that operated in the past (McWilliam, 2004; Deem & Brehony, 2005; Land, 2006). Such a development can also be linked to a desire by university management and external agencies to exercise a wider monitoring of the institution and its personnel, a setting similar to that already often found in the corporate sector (Noble, 1998; D’Urso, 2006). Traditionally, universities exhibited a characteristic decentralised organisational structure where decision-making and knowledge creation was carried out within semi-autonomous and specialised units (Weick, 1976). In recent years however, as Boezerooy (2006) has commented, there has been a trend towards more centralised management structures and business-like approaches – whereby various types of decisions traditionally taken by academics individually are now being increasingly made by senior managers who no longer see themselves or act as academics.

New Managerialism and eLearning

A new breed of change agent personnel – ‘managerial professionals’ – have also now emerged to play a more strategic role (Rhoades, 1996). These individuals are positioned between academics and administrators and they use various means to further promote standards in quality assurance, to try and ensure that any risks taken in policy initiatives and by academic staff are minimalised (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002; McWilliam, 2004), that the institution’s profile within the national and international market-place is advanced on what is seen as a surefooted basis.
Davies (2003) saw such direction though as having a more menacing aspect. Instances of what is known as ‘new managerialism’ achieve their ends through a mixture of compliance, feelings of anxiety and – on the surface – appearances of rather paternalistic behaviour (Wells, 2006). There are often unrealistic expectations held by senior management and their immediate associates for immediate results, especially in the light of the limited human resources that they have available (Bates, 1999) and a misunderstanding of the challenges involved with creating a pedagogically effective and widely supported eLearning system (Goolnik, 2010). Questions from staff regarding the scheme of things are viewed as objectionable, can easily be dismissed as unrealistic and result in severe consequences for those who make them. Academics need to work harder to be ‘good enough’ to address the new ‘exacting challenges’ (Davies, 2003, p. 95).

A Watchful and Controlling Presence in eLearning

Assumptions and beliefs about cyberspace – i.e. “the worlds and domains generated by digital information and communications technologies” (Nayar, 2010, p. 1) – were in its early years mainly influenced by the concept of Technological Determinism. The latter held that technology led to changes in society that emerged from its introduction and use but that it did so in an autonomous fashion, limited only by the material resources available and (unlike “Social” determinism) independently of any social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Heidegger, 1977; Strobel and Tillberg-Web, 2008). Bell (2001) noted that “such a straightforward determinism retains a powerful influence on how people think and talk about things like cyberspace…” (p. 66) and, as a philosophy, it became very influential (Williams, 1974). Libertarians as referenced by Hand (2008) and Mopas (2009) indeed believed that these social changes – both nationally and internationally – would provide the key to greater prosperity, wealth and security. Social hierarchies, where power was something possessed by one group and exercised over another, would disappear, creating in their place, as Hand puts it, a new “cyber-republic of voluntary associations and interest groups” (2008, p. 20).

However, as Hand and Sandywell (2002) have observed, the culture that actually came about was something rather more akin to agendas that had previously existed elsewhere. It resulted in “profit in the political sphere, hegemony in the political sphere and ideological domination in the cultural sphere…” (p. 203). Indeed, Habermas – quoted by Jeffries (2010) – has concluded that the power of the individual is rather hollow and “now confined to the individual freedom of choice of consumers who are living off the drip-feed of contingent opportunity structures.”

As Cullen (2005) and Kanuka (2008) have both highlighted, a transformation of education – “technological utopianism” (Strobel & Tillberg-Webb, 2008) – was originally also promised through cyberspace. eLearning was going to offer the potential to radically change instruction and learning methods allowing for an enhanced student-centred approach to be introduced, which would in turn promote a higher order of understanding along sound social constructivist lines. It was an education system that, in its operations, would inevitably open up access, transcending the barriers of time and space. Mopas (2009) quotes McChesney (1999) who believed that the Internet should uphold a “vision of a non-commercial sharing community of scholars and, eventually, all citizens of the world” (p. 5).

However, Land (2006) felt that one major theme revealed by his research was that technology offered a carte-blanche means to senior management to intervene in academic practices in ways that would have been up to then unacceptable. This links up very much with the desire mentioned earlier to intervene much more actively generally. Indeed, left as they are, Virtual
Learning Environments (VLEs) – that rather ubiquitous feature of online delivery and support – can quite easily be seen as being part of a new managerialist strategy. Epling, Timmons, and Wharrad (2003), Land and Bayne (2005), Wells (2006) and D’Urso (2006) all concluded that Foucault’s (1991) use of Bentham’s “Panopticon” or cylinder shaped prison, the open cells of which were directly overlooked by centrally placed inspection house offered an unfortunately apt description of what has increasingly become a standard for the hierarchical power relationships in learning online. Such a concept exemplifies the belief that individuals can be controlled or made “docile” by an uncertainty over whether they are being constantly watched behind the shutters of the central inspection tower – or in this instance monitored by an electronic inspection “house” from within and beyond the VLE. Dawson (2006) for instance concluded from his study that postings to discussion forums were influenced by the extent to which the students felt that they were under surveillance from both the university and its academic staff. Academics can in turn be watched over by managers (Land & Bayne, 2005) with detailed information on facilitator engagement or lack of it (Maltby & Mackie, 2009). With electronic forms of surveillance – the panopticon VLE now has no technical limitations to its operations. We have as such entered the realms of what Poster (1990) termed the “Superpanopticon” (p. 93) or what Zuboff (1989) has called “information Panopticons” (p. 322). In the case of universities, the emphasis has shifted from a special and relaxed relationship of the academic with colleagues and students to one that is more formal, “based on the relationship a worker has with the ‘expert’ information systems through which the performance records of students, peers and self are managed” (McWilliam, 2004, p. 158).

Such enterprise is also exemplified in the terms used by vendors of Virtual Learning Environment platforms too. Land gave the example of one VLE, WebCT, where the role of the ‘administrator’ was very much to the fore, and the platform was ‘an academic enterprise system’, and an example of ‘onscreen real estate’” (2006, pp. 101-102). It certainly also highlights to practitioners such as Dreyfus (2001) and Noble (1998) the extent to which academic standards and freedoms have been eroded in what they would see as the blind pursuit of commodification of knowledge (Usher and Edwards, 1998) and, with it, commercial gain. Although surveillance can also be employed in a positive manner (Dawson, Burnett, & McArdle, 2005), as an aid to pick up on a need for support and provide a means to bring about improved understanding of the processes at work, Main (2004) suggests that fundamentally an environment in which “an invisible and judgemental figure” (p. 342) is continually watching is not a healthy one. Beckmann and Cooper (2004) also remark that it provides “bleak prospects for the development of diverse curricula and research projects, as well as critical models of teaching and learning.”

**Academic Staff Perceptions of and Reactions**

Although Aldred (2003) saw Higher Education as “possibly one of the last bastions of conservatism” this attitude does not preclude any considered use of learning technology. Cuban’s research (2001) in fact intimates that academics do adopt technologies which are reliable, that match their beliefs about student learning, and which add to the psychological rewards of teaching. They are only indifferent to changes that they see as irrelevant to their own [subject based] practice (Isaacs & Parker, 1997; McPherson, 2003), increasing their burden without adding benefits to their students’ learning or weakening their control in the classroom. As Annand commented: “If people matter more than technology, and machines are useful only if they contribute to a greater human (rather than economic) good, changes that are perceived threats to these ideals are opposed” (2007, p. 5).
As a consequence, any significant move into eLearning could be seen by academic staff as a purely cost-cutting means of course delivery with little or no academic value whatsoever, serving managerial ends rather being back by sound pedagogical theories and practices; and that the eventual outcome could be a loss of jobs with an eventual dilution of standards (Lynch & Collins, 2001; Wheeler, 2008). Hanson (2009) discovered a very powerful wish amongst her interviewees to protect what they saw as a cornerstone of their academic identity – their face-to-face teaching relationship with their students – that they feared would suffer if eLearning became predominant. Meanwhile Catherall (2006) was troubled about such an uncritical leap into the eLearning format because it “is a technology in the earliest stages of development as a teaching method”. Furthermore, Bennett and Marsh (2002), the Coimbra Group of Universities (2002) and Whitworth (2005) observed that, compared to the long history of didactic approaches, there was relatively speaking not the same quantity of research evidence and personal experience to draw from to substantiate views as to the value of eLearning as a mainstream activity. Globally also, concerns about over-inflated claims of eLearning adoption rates and educational transformations (Noble 1998; Dreyfus, 2001; Ayres & Grisham, 2003; Zemsky & Massy, 2004) have surfaced.

Quite apart from the earlier expressed views on the controlling aspects of Virtual Learning Environments fault has been found how they have developed and whether they provide a true break with teaching’s didactic past. Bayne (2004) believed, that VLEs can be seen as ‘walled gardens’ protecting costly, copyrighted learning materials, allowing for no gaps in their ‘walls’ against the outside world and integrating seamlessly with the other university management systems and replicating in many other respects traditional higher education features and standard practices (albeit through technological means). In so doing though, there is a danger that they will fail to motivate and engage (Bayne, 2004) and to exploit the possibilities of achieving deeper learning experiences (Bayne 2005; Bayne, 2008; Hemmi, Bayne, and Land, 2009), passing over opportunities for the incorporation of more open, accessible, and engaging frameworks that have emerged through web 2.0 (or the ‘social web’) (Bayne, 2008; Land & Bayne, 2008; Wheeler, 2008).

The Need for Meaningful Consultations

Measures introduced through ‘new managerial’ approaches have often therefore failed to guarantee inclusivity and instead generated feelings of mistrust, stress and of a professionally and personally unfulfilled ‘self’ (McWilliam, 2004; Wells, 2006). Both Kotter (1996) and Zidle (1998) have estimated that 65 to 70 per cent of organisational change is unsuccessful because change is viewed as a special event and not as an ongoing mental, emotional and physical process of personal transition within an ever changing environment and particularly regarding teaching and learning (Robertson, 2008). Entering into dialogue with academic staff is unfortunately often perceived by those in charge as taking up an unnecessary amount of time (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998). Leadership, Ramsden (1998) judged, is definitely about taking charge of and effectively managing change but it is all too easy, as Duke (2002, p. 136) suggested, for those individuals at the top and those directly answerable to them to become a "closed, self-referencing system". They end up attempting to impose changes in ways that struggle to establish out any long-lasting roots.

As the joint SFEFC/SHEFC E-Learning Group report (2003) indicated, it is crucial that such courseware and its support are regarded by all parties as academically sound and institutionally wise. While many if not most educational institutions have learning and teaching strategies that, for instance, make reference to eLearning they fail to tackle how it is
best embedded in university everyday practices, preferring to concentrate on the introduction and/or implementation (Stiles & Yorke, 2004). To carry through an eLearning based initiative at all levels a certain degree of fine detail must be included (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2010), a “road map” that clearly explain the reasons behind the move and how it will affect other aspects of the University’s provision and services (Alexander 2001). An institution needs to turn itself – through its underlying philosophy and operational practices – into very much a learning organisation (McPherson, 2003). Rather than being reliant on unwavering attitudes handed down from on high, Uys (2007) viewed change management strategies that incorporate both top-down and bottom-up movements as being the most effective. Academic staff can then much more easily gain an understanding of why change is important and necessary (Betts, 1998; Edmonds, 1999; Oliver & Dempster, 2002). Fear of the unknown Bates (1999) felt is perhaps the biggest obstacle to change with anger is targeted at the changes that fed the fear. To overcome the latter, academics need in consequence to be fully involved/have full ‘ownership’ in the design, development and carrying out of the changes (Angelo, 2003); they have to have this understanding of their new roles; an appreciation of eLearning both its usefulness and ease-of-use (Davis, 1989), while the results eventually produced should be truly determinable (Lewis, 1998; Rockwell, Schauer, Fritz, & Marx, 2000; Welsh & Metcalf, 2003; Latchem, 2004). Such knowledge, created through understanding, encourages employees to change the environment in which they live (Dixon, 1999, p. 3) and a greater commitment to emerge (Cousin, 2005; Bijiker, 1995, as referenced by Smith, 2005).

Senior management could therefore do well to understand the situation from an ordinary academic’s perspective (Ramsden, 1998) and react in a sympathetic manner. “Stealthy” approaches (Browne & Shurville, 2006) that hopefully stimulate new and creative ways of doing and thinking thrive on individuals who challenge themselves as well as the system, helping to build a shared trust, motivation and language and working forward to determine outcomes, strategies, and activities. Moves should inclusively acknowledge the past, its achievements and disappointments, and lead to a clear idea of future direction, structures and attitudes (Martinsuo, 1996). What is more, if academics are to change their teaching practices, they do need to feel that the effort that they put into responding in a positive fashion is appreciated and that their other commitments will not suffer (Pellicoione & Giddings, 2002; Hanson, 2003; Newton, 2003; Shannon & Doube, 2003; Goolnik, 2010). If they see policies as punitive or aggressive, they will not have a strong motivation to participate, change and improve (Martin, 1993; Bates, 1999).

Pinchot (1985, p. 3) has posited that “In [a] time of rapid economic and technological change, the entrepreneurial spirit can be a unique and important advantage, but only if we learn to use it.” Any innovation is still likely to produce conflict (Whitworth, 2005) but this should be viewed in a positive light, as a creative process, and an eventual consensus being achieved amongst all parties should be seen as an innovation becoming embedded.

Conclusions

In the early days of the World Wide Web, views on cyberspace and its potential were basically driven by feelings that changes in society were being determined by technology; and that these changes would bring about a social revolution. However, in reality, market driven forces put an end to this idealism and what freedoms were promised are now, in comparison, quite limited. In education, a similar utopianism flourished promising greater access and a student-centred approach. However, the emergence of Virtual Learning
Environments did not, in the opinions of some, bode well from both a motivational point of view and a relaxed deeper student learning experience. Virtual Learning Environments can so easily take on board a quite sinister nature comparing the monitoring that goes on with that of a hidden presence that oversees not only students but, higher up, even the staff facilitators always being audited in terms of their performance and standards.

All of this can be linked to a greater desire by university management to introduce corporate style measures of quality control to appease governmental pressure and supplement diminished public funding by producing saleable packages of knowledge through marketplace initiatives. Academic staff now work to a regime that is very threatening if knowledge is not commodified in this manner and standards are not attained and maintained in the process. However, it’s an unhealthy situation, being at odds with Higher Education’s intellectual traditions.

Fear is cited as the biggest obstacle to change and, as many (older) members of academic staff have become skilled using only traditional face-to-face didactic approaches, they understandably feel challenged and ill-equipped to face new technologically enhanced, student-centred means of teaching and learning. What is more, they also need to be convinced as higher education practitioners that these methods possess real educational value.

So, particularly in times of change, people management skills are of critical importance. They should, in particular, underpin the development and launch of an effective eLearning strategy explaining the bigger background rationale, the intended institutional response and be circulated as part of a meaningful consultative process to address any academic staff concerns. Senior manager should understand the situation from an ordinary academic’s perspective. By such means, employed on a continuing basis, trust and wider ownership can be more easily embedded.

References


Hanson, J. (2009). Displaced but not replaced: the impact of e-learning on academic identities in higher education. Teaching in Higher Education: Voicing Perspectives, 14(5), 553-564


Lifelong Learning Institute Dipoli, Helsinki University of Technology, Espoo and Rovaniemi, Finland. 16-20 June 1996.


