Old Dogs and New E-Tricks: Staff Development in a South African Tertiary Institution.

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Abstract: This paper reports on a study in progress at RAU University (RAU) in Johannesburg, South Africa. Participants in the study are online lecturers at RAU who consider themselves to be experienced face-to-face instructors. Since 1998, progressive updates of WebCT™ have been implemented at RAU to support a growing number of instructors embracing the new multimodal approach to teaching. In many cases, being able to use the available technologies has become a necessity rather than a matter of choice, but even though technology has found general acceptance at RAU, change has come slowly. This study identifies the central role that staff (faculty) can play in this process of change through a process of action research. This process cannot be seen as a top down process, but rather a complex one in which the online instructor is very active. Initial findings have identified that higher education technology strategies ignore the central role that staff (faculty) can play in the change process.

Introduction and Orientation
Instructors at the Rand Afrikaans University (RAU), Johannesburg, South Africa, are relatively new to web-based education and have used WebCT™ in various ways since its inception in 1998, ranging from optional online components with a purely administrative function only, to courses that are presented exclusively online. Surrey and Land (2000) point out the potential of technology to change the nature of the teaching and learning process. Bennett, Priest and Macpherson (1999) emphasise that it is not the technology that is important, but rather how it is used by the instructor to create new experiences for the learner. Even though technology has found acceptance at RAU, change has come slowly. One reason for the lack of utilisation of this innovation, as suggested by Surrey and Land (2000), is that most university-level technology strategies ignore the central role that staff (faculty) can play in the change process. Williams and Peters (1997) suggest that faculty members with similar course responsibilities should collaborate and pool their expertise and resources. Unfortunately, as we have found out in this study, many of these faculty members are uncomfortable working with colleagues and are more accustomed to working alone. According to Jennings and Dirksen (1997), the challenge is to assist instructors in making the change. Through a process of action research this study will be used to develop and implement a programme, including a curriculum for web-based teaching with the focus on the creation and use of environments in which learning is facilitated (Alessi & Trollip, 2001). The curriculum can ultimately be used as a core module in a professional development course within the university, or as a stand-alone course to assist instructors in improving their web-based teaching. This pro-active approach is in line with keeping ahead of, and adapting to, changes in the role of the traditional academic institution as well documented by Porter (1997), Radford (1997), and Palloff and Pratt (1999).

Participants
Two recent studies at RAU have influenced participant selection in this study. Firstly, it was discovered that instructor concerns about the quality of teaching and keeping up with innovative teaching techniques rated higher than a general interest in online teaching (Cronjé & Murdoch, 2000:[Online]). Rogers’ theory of innovativeness suggests that innovators and early adopters would adopt a new innovation because they are interested in any new innovation, rather than being concerned with its specific use or value (Rogers, 1995:279). A possible explanation for the instructor concern about quality teaching in the above-mentioned study, may be that most of the early adopters of WebCT™ at RAU were from the Faculty of Education and Nursing, where most of the online teaching was implemented, based from the start on what could reasonably be expected to have been informed and professional educational principles (Cronjé & Murdoch, 2000:[Online]). In a more recent study at RAU, novice online instructors with no formal qualifications in any form of educational science, little or no knowledge of pedagogy as a science, and no training in instructional design showed that they too could contribute to design principles for online education (van der Westhuizen & Lautenbach, 2002). This study therefore focuses on a group of early adopters, including novice online instructors.

Methodology
A qualitative design was implemented, underpinned by the principles of action research as described by Zuber-Skerritt (1996), McNiff, Lomax and Whitehead (1996), and Kuhne and Quigley (1997). Zuber-Skerritt (1992b) sees this as an appropriate approach for evaluating teaching and staff development in higher education (human phenomena in complex relationships), with the aim of effecting change by integrating theory and practice in action research with or by the teachers themselves. Zuber-Skerritt (1992b), points out that there is evidence that curriculum development is an effective
way of developing the professional competencies of academic staff in higher education. Action research in this case has proven to be a way to include academics who would not normally discuss and critically reflect upon their courses and programmes with others. Apart from phenomenology, action research has become the most influential and almost certainly the fastest-growing orientation towards educational and staff development at present (compare Webb, 1996). The method of action research as described by Zuber-Skerritt (1992a) can be seen as cyclic moments of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Having completed one such cycle, participants have spiraled into a further series of offshoot cycles (Webb, 1996).

Findings and Conclusions

In the initial cycle of this study, instructors had the opportunity to plan, implement (act) and observe their own web-based teaching. Data was collected in an initial round of open interviews with instructors and concurrent analysis, with further rounds of interviews on completion of each new semester to further investigate emerging themes. Initial sampling was purposive to achieve a balance of gender and a variety of subject areas. Key informant interviews were held with individuals who we believed possessed special knowledge, status and communicative skills, and who were willing to share their knowledge and skill (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Further data was collected using a reflective journal based on events, comments made by the participants, and our own experiences during the research process. Relevant postings from the discussion forums within the various virtual classrooms were also analysed. This study is a work in progress. The initial data analysis has identified that online instructors at RAU have specific needs in the field of web-based education. It is clear that novice instructors can benefit from the combined knowledge of other online instructors and the exposure to design principles for online learning. The choice of the action research methodology has proven to be a productive and fruitful exercise and has resulted in meaningful contributions from a wide variety of instructors who, in the past, have not been a major source of shared information. Preliminary findings are that the greatest need is for technical assistance and training. There is also an expressed need to discuss online education matters with other instructors and to share ideas. Further cycles of the action research process will be implemented in order to refine the proposed programme for staff development at RAU and it is evident that the instructors themselves have an active role to play in this process.

List of sources


Porter, LR 1997: Creating the Virtual Classroom: Distance Learning with the Internet. New York: John Wiley & Sons Inc.


