A small multi-site Higher Education institution managing change in its e-learning culture

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ABSTRACT

This paper and associated poster report on the participant-observation of a project team working in a multi-site Higher Education institution in north-west England. The team was set up to create an action plan for the enhancement of flexible and distributed learning but as the project progressed it became clear that this was not an appropriate target. The paper reflects on the project team's engagement with the Higher Education Academy's "Change Academy" programme, its influence on their working methods and intended outcomes.

Keywords

Change Academy, CSCL, Action Research, Higher Education

INTRODUCTION

This paper summarises a poster which introduced an ongoing project being undertaken in the north-west of England. The project involves undertaking a series of research engagements with a multi-site institution which is re-orientating its e-learning culture. The focus of the engagements is the change management process adopted for the re-orientation. The aim of the research project is to draw lessons from the development and implementation of the change management process for wider dissemination. The aim of the poster was to introduce the project and expose the research team's intentions and proposed working methods to wider scrutiny.

The institution's 'home base' is in Cumbria and North Lancashire. The physical, economic, demographic and infrastructure features of this region are distinctive, The environment in which the change is taking place is multicultural in the sense that the region contains disparate populations with limited intercommunication. Some populations are in scattered rural communities with substantial physical barriers to travel. Others are in relatively dense urban settings. The cultural differences are a significant factor in the project's environment. This set of circumstances has led to a distributed model of Higher Education being proposed for the area (Harris, 2005).

The institution is in flux, undergoing development in terms of status, provision and structure, with a diverse staff and knowledge base, and a geographically dispersed student body. The special features of this situation make a networked learning approach a natural one to adopt. However this is not a simple technical step; a full recognition of the dominant cultural dimensions of the problem must be embedded in the change process.

CHANGE ACADEMY PROCESS

The change management process being adopted is designed to be distinctively inclusive. In the poster, it was argued that the transformation of e-learning from a technical phenomenon to an educational phenomenon represents "organisational", as distinct from "process" or "system" change (Seel, 2005) and that this cannot be effectively embedded in a top-down fashion. There is no guarantee that the newer e-learning technologies will inherently create a networked learning culture.

The institution made a successful bid for engagement with the HEA / Leadership Foundation "Change Academy". The creative thinking and soft systems (Checkland, 1981) techniques and tools deployed in the Change Academy moved the project group from a focus on system and process change towards a focus on organisational change. For example, concerns about the concept of an 'e-learning community' were brought into focus, "especially its association with consensus and pressures to conform ["to some accepted set of beliefs and

practices"]" (Hodgson and Reynolds, 2005:11 and 16). The project group also felt some resonance with Whitworth's (2005) observation of: "…a bias towards studying e-learning as technology and pedagogy, but away from self-reflective study of it as a work-based innovation." (p689)

It is clear that the institution needs to move towards developing the potential to deliver fully distributed or online learning where and when it is required. The change process involves developing options by being comfortable with and accepting an ongoing process of change, which stakeholders can engage with in the knowledge they will be supported. The Change Academy process will form a core foundation for this work

WORKING METHODS

As participant-observers, the project/research group is adopting a spiral model to conceptualise and explain this work, adopting an action research approach which "… follows spirals or cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, so there is an opportunity to work with academic staff over an extended period to allow time for conceptual change." (Kember, 1997:272)

The working methods of the project group are of interest. For example, their use of a VLE as a vehicle for exploring the problem area raises questions about value of the VLE as a collaborative learning tool, as a content management system, and as a wider group support system. Salmon's (2000) work on evaluating VLEs in computer mediated communication is illuminating this aspect of the study. "Conversations" were a key feature throughout the project. The research into what the team did focuses on two contrasting areas: face-to-face discussions in the intensive Change Academy Conference environment; and ongoing virtual conversations undertaken through the VLE. The face-to-face discussions were captured through individual reflective 'journal entries' written immediately after the conference. The VLE conversation process was evaluated through individual interviews with team members.

EVALUATION

In order to instigate a preliminary qualitative evaluation of the work to date, an audit was undertaken by the research team at the conclusion of the first stage of the project when the project team had presented a "Framework for Action" to senior management. In this audit, the possible risks to the success of the change management process were reviewed, focusing on the effectiveness and wider acceptance of the project team's processes and outcomes. Attention was paid to the evolving nature of team leadership (Thamhain, 2004) as a distinctive feature of the project team is its cross-institution provenance. It was concluded that it was too early to assess the acceptance of the team's outcomes as initial impressions of a favourable management reception are not necessarily precursors of successful implementation (McBride, 1997). However it was found that none of the risks to the project team's processes, which had been derived directly from the Change Academy process, had arisen. Through its participant-observation of the project team, including the audit process, the research team has identified the specific strands of forthcoming research explored in the poster.

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