The changing nature of learning and teaching at CSU (2008 – 2011): setting the context

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[2012]
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The research question considered by the larger study

*What do the strategies and activities designed to foster change in blended and flexible learning and distance education developed at Charles Sturt University (Australia) and Massey University (NZ) help us to understand about learning leadership?*

Introduction

This essay\(^1\) draws a picture of the changing learning and teaching environment at Charles Sturt University (CSU) as a context for the six case studies that were developed for the larger study. It uses a social-ecological systems approach to describe this environment. From 2007 to 2011 what was life like at CSU? What were the aspirations for learning and teaching, who were the staff and students and what day to day challenges did they face? How did the University vision, infrastructure and processes frame and support learning and teaching? What was happening in the broader higher education environment? Four of the cases are of strategies and activities conducted within the Flexible Learning Institute (the FLI) at CSU. What were the aspirations of the FLI within CSU as an institution? And finally, in the midst of massive change in a number of spheres, what strategies were being used effectively on-ground to develop learning leadership?

The University

Charles Sturt University is a regional, multi-campus university based in NSW with study centres in cities such as Melbourne and Sydney, a campus in Ontario, Canada, as well as links with international partner institutions. The multi-campus nature of CSU (Bathurst, Wagga Wagga, Albury-Wodonga, Orange, Canberra, Parramatta, Manly, Dubbo and Ontario Canada), creates particular challenges for the logistics of administration, teaching and the support of learning and teaching. Faculties, divisions and institutes must necessarily work across the campuses and all four faculties have at least one fully cross-campus school. CSU is a dual-mode university offering courses (programs) in on-campus and distance education (DE) modes. In 2010 the University had approximately 38,000 students of whom approximately two-thirds were enrolled as distance education (DE) students.

The official enrolment mode choices for students in subjects is either internal (on-campus) or distance education (DE) and from 2006 to 2011 there was an increasing use of blended and flexible learning, in its broadest sense, as a pedagogical approach to enhancing the

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\(^1\) This contextual piece draws heavily on research and writing done for a Ph.D. study: ‘Developing resilience and managing change in technology-enhanced learning environments’ (Buchan 2013 in prep.) which took place over the time period 2007-2011. There is a planned submission date of late 2012 for the final thesis. This piece also draws on publications and presentations associated with this research and these have been referenced where appropriate.
student learning experience. However, as will be seen, the University infrastructure, policy and processes did not always adequately support blended learning approaches (Buchan, Rafferty & Munday, 2009). The introduction in 2007/2008 of a new online learning environment CSU Interact (the open source Sakai collaborative Learning environment) and progressive introduction of new educational technology and improved infrastructure (campus spaces) has contributed to the uptake of blended learning approaches.

CSU subscribes to institutional centralised strategic planning processes which guide the long term direction of the university. One of CSU’s stated commitments in its 2007-2011 University Strategy was; “… to achieving excellence in education for the professions and to maintaining national leadership in flexible and distance education” (Charles Sturt University, 2006).

Planned actions to achieve that vision included:

- “providing an accessible and effective learning environment for all students, regardless of location or mode of study
- strengthening learning and teaching partnerships with the professions and industry

Although there is a strong emphasis on learning and teaching at the university, the majority of full-time academic teaching staff necessarily have dual research and teaching roles. However, casual (contract) staff account for a high portion of the teaching load, in some cases up to 70% of subjects in a course may be taught by casual staff members, many of whom are regular teachers and well experienced in their fields. This fits well with CSU’s focus on educating for the professions where part-time or casual staff can be actively practising in their field as well as teaching in the discipline, although it does contribute to significant problems with continuity of staffing and in maintaining a holistic approach to courses and programs. The increasing integration of educational technology into courses means there is a steep learning curve for new staff in getting up to speed with managing their online subject environment.

The notion of a sedentary academic in an ‘ivory’ tower, giving the occasional lecture to eager young students is somewhat mythical, at least at CSU. Apart from the fact that we have an eclectic mix of nine unique and distinctive campuses with few ‘ivory towers’ in sight (see http://www.csu.edu.au/about/locations ), there is a high proportion of mature-aged students enrolled in DE courses which significantly changes the demographics. While there are many ‘normal’ on-campus classes at CSU, the varied Faculty approaches to course delivery and cross-campus schools necessitate a broad range of teaching ‘modes’ and strategies. Academics can be expected to travel regularly between campuses (in a few cases up to several hundred kilometres per week) to keep up face-to-face teaching commitments. Others may engage in live interactive video teaching (IVT) or synchronous virtual classroom activities (using Wimba – CSU’s Online Meeting) to teach students on different campuses enrolled in a single subject, or to work through anti-social time zones when communicating with CSU’s Ontario campus staff and students. Staff teaching fully DE courses may never
meet their students face-to-face with other DE lecturers dedicating a number of days of their non-teaching period (vacation?) to residential schools and field trips. Staff work on site with partner institutions and students in Asia (China and Malaysia).

While the aspirational goals for providing “…an accessible and effective learning environment for all students, regardless of location or mode of study” may contribute positively to the student learning experience, the corollary is that the academic role at CSU requires considerable versatility and the ongoing development of a growing set of skills. At a minimum, the ‘average’ academic needs to be a researcher, writer of academic publications, teacher, curriculum developer, writer and editor of subject resources in a variety of media, classroom lecturer, tutor, online publisher of learning resources, a competent online teacher/facilitator – and extremely hard working.

Understanding the organisational and learning environment
In 2007 Charles Sturt University adopted a new University Strategy (Charles Sturt University 2006) to guide the strategic direction and development of the university over the time period 2007-2011. This Strategy guided the planned changes from within the institution and assisted in guiding the University’s response to external impacts, such as changes in Government and the Bradley review of Higher Education (2008).

In order to understand the changing nature of learning and teaching at CSU it is useful to become familiar with the holistic context of the environment in which learning and teaching takes place. At its simplest, the learning environment can be described as the place or space in which learning takes place. This could be a physical space such as a classroom, a virtual space such as an online learning environment, or a personal learning environment in its broadest sense. The components of the learning environment which enable that learning to take place include students, teachers, learning resources and technology (Figure 1).

The primary research question in this study was “What do the strategies and activities developed at CSU and Massey (to foster change in BFL, open and DE) help us to understand about learning leadership?” (Childs, Brown, Keppell, Hard & Hunter, 2011). An insight into how to contextualise learning leadership within an organisation and the broader higher education environment, while linking to the on-ground learning and teaching activity in the actual learning environment, is provided by introducing a social-ecological systems approach. A social-ecological system may be described as the interaction between two systems namely, a social system and an ecological system.
Figure 1. The social-ecological system/sphere of influence model showing the relationship between the learning environment, the organisation and the external environment (Buchan, in prep).

The ‘social’ part of the social-ecological systems approach employs systems analysis to look at the interactions and relationships of people and components in the system in order to identify the issues, problems and opportunities faced with respect to change in the learning environment (Buchan, 2008). The ecological system, or ecosystem, can be identified as the organisation that effectively supports the learning environment. The boundary of the ecosystem can be drawn at a number of levels according to the sphere of influence and/or locus of control (Buchan 2012). For example the boundary of the ecosystem and locus of control for the vice-chancellor is the whole organisation i.e. the university. For a dean it is the faculty, for a head of school it is the school, and for the lecturer it might be the course, subject or (virtual) class. Figure 1 illustrates the social-ecological system/sphere of influence model.

This locus of control or sphere of influence approach only gives a broad brush stroke and the boundaries are not quite that simple since in reality, at a whole-of-organisation level individuals work across a number of levels through their formal representation on committees and working groups and through their informal, collegial connections. As an entity the Flexible Learning Institute can be placed within the school/faculty level. However, it’s staff has influence at a number of organisational levels through formal representation on internal and external committees, through initiatives such as the DE HUB and (former) ALTC projects, and informally through collegial networks. Academics who are members of the Flexible Learning Institute also have influence at school and faculty levels and through their teaching, have influence in the actual student learning environment.
If the development of learning leaders in situ, through authentic problem solving supported by institutional strategies, does lie at the heart of meaningful change (Childs et al., 2011), then the application of the social-ecological system/sphere of influence approach to this research study may provide a way to understand and position the strategies and activities which have contributed to fostering change in blended and flexible learning (BFL) and open and distance learning. It can also be used to identify and classify/categorise the events, decisions and people which impacted on the learning environment during the time period of the study, including the very real influences of the many impacts and changes within the university and higher education environment on the researchers and their students. Figure 2 (below) shows a snapshot of some of the strategies which have been identified as contributing towards the institutional strategic intent towards fostering learning and teaching.

**Figure 2.** Institutional strategies which contribute to fostering learning and teaching

Two of the case studies reported in the wider study are located in the lower left square – the CSUED Conferences, and the FLI Fellowship Scheme (FLI fellows). The Flexible Learning Institute, which hosted the wider study, sits within the top right square as a university wide strategy. The six case studies reflect the influences of all the strategies in a combined sense.

**The changing learning and teaching environment at CSU**

In CSU’s large and complex organisation there have been numerous changes and impacts in the organisation and on learning, some with a direct and others with an indirect impact. A **snapshot** is presented here of those events, initiatives and impacts and decisions which may have impacted on the learning and teaching environment (Table 1).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of sphere of influence</th>
<th>Event/change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>2010 - Introduction of a new unified session model (USM) of teaching sessions; 2009 - new Mandatory Subject Information (MSI) policy and Online Subject Outline system; 2009 - Change in staffing profiles and salary ceilings; introduction of new educational technology CSU Interact; 2009 CSU – SCU Feasibility study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty/division or unit</td>
<td>2006 onwards faculty &amp; school restructures;2007 strategic voluntary separation – academic staff; 2008 cross-campus courses beginning; 2009 formation of new Div. of Learning &amp; Teaching Services; changing student profile; move from print to online learning resources (ongoing); lack of adequate timetabling system to support flexible delivery modes; implementation of a new OLE CSU Interact, introduction of new educational technology, 2009 Subject Outline Tool etc.; 2010 – curriculum renewal; 2008-2011 CSU Ed conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School/division or unit</td>
<td>academic staff shortages; changing student profile; perceived increase in workloads; course reviews and changes; research directions; increase in numbers of sessional academic staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 1.** A snapshot of events and changes which have influenced the learning and teaching environment at Charles Sturt University over the time period 2007-2011.

**Organisational structural change**

There has been a major change in organisational structure and associated staffing changes since 2007. Figure 3 attempts to capture those structural organisational changes which purportedly support and foster learning and teaching. There was the establishment of the Flexible Learning Institute and Educating for Practice Institute in 2008. The merging of the Centre for Enhancing Learning and Teaching (CELT) and the Learning Materials Centre in 2009 into the Division of Learning and Teaching Services cemented the core functions of educational design and support for the development of digital and online media learning resources. The Strategic Learning Teaching and Innovation section (SLTI) of DLTS has a ‘virtual team’ of IT solutions coordinators and developers dedicated to educational technology. SLTI works collaboratively with other areas of the University (DIT), and with educational designers and academic staff. The relative ‘autonomy’ of SLTI in managing educational technology has significantly enhanced the capacity and agility of learning and teaching support services to direct the educational technology needs of the University into the future. No detail has been included here about structural changes within the faculties but it is acknowledged that there is significant work in this area with varied strategies used in faculties and some of these will emerge from this DEHub project.
The changing technology-enhanced learning environment

In 2007/2008 CSU implemented a new online learning environment called CSU Interact. CSU was the first Australian university to adopt Sakai as an institution-wide technology. The platform on which Interact is based is the community source software, Sakai (Sakai version 2.4) which is known as a collaborative learning environment. It has full LMS (learning management system) functionality but was chosen by CSU over other similar products (Moodle, WebCT, Blackboard) because the university wanted more than just a set of tools for management of classroom learning environments but an online learning environment which would enable collaboration and research.

CSU has had a commitment to online learning since the late 1990’s and in 1998 it was mandated that all DE subjects should have an online presence. Prior to Interact, CSU had been using an in-house developed VLE (virtual learning environment) and tools such as online Forums (1999), OASIS - an online quiz tool (1999,2003), CSU Chat (1999), Flexible Publishing (1999,2003) were progressively introduced. The introduction of Interact changed the paradigm of learning and teaching across the university by taking CSU into the world of Web 2.0 technology and giving academics the opportunity for teaching online and having some ‘control’ over - as well as more responsibility for - the provision of online learning resources and communication with their DE students. CSU came late into the Web 2.0 world and Interact changed the paradigm of learning and teaching. The CSU Education (CSU Ed) conferences from 2008-2011 and other forums within the university such as the ICT-Integration Community of Practice and the social-networking site Yammer have shown that there is a rich and growing pedagogical application of technology. A university-wide Educational Technology Survey of staff and students in 2010 (Uys, Keppell, McKinney,
Morton-Allen & Nelson, 2010) showed that the uptake of Interact has exceeded expectations and appears to be generally above the average (Uys et al., 2011).

The journey has not been smooth and there have been pockets of resistance and slower than desired uptake of technology in some areas (Buchan, 2011). Problems with planning and implementation of some new educational technology systems have created major disruption. Thus, when initiatives/ventures are not as successful as expected, despite extensive planning and investment, we perhaps need to use a different lens to examine the situation. While there have been considerable changes in educational technology during the time period of the study, it is useful to contextualise these in the longer time frame of developments in the University. If we were to move beyond just technology, we could identify the many other events and initiatives/activities both within and outside of the organisation which impact on the lives of the very real people (staff and students) who are in the midst of the ‘change’ which a new system such as Interact brings.

The concept of para-analysis (Buchan, 2010) is introduced here to try to capture both a temporal aspect of impacts of events as well as quantifying those impacts. Figure 4 maps the impact of educational technology which academic staff use, or at least need to have some involvement with, in order to carry out their normal teaching and research duties. For more detail on how impact is assessed readers are directed to the original publication and to (Buchan, 2012). Also mapped are some key events in the university which impacted on individuals and may have influenced the achievement of the aspirational goals for the introduction of the technology.
Figure 4. A para-analysis view of the impact of teaching and administrative systems used by academic staff in their work at CSU (Buchan, in prep.).

What this visual representation of the impact of technology shows is that the introduction of new technology needs to be viewed in an holistic way and to take account of the long term and broader context of the changing environment in which people work. This is the reality of the learning and teaching environment at CSU.

This is only a brief snapshot from a single perspective, that of the CSU academic. The impact of the same technology and events will look different when viewed from the eyes of the DVC (Academic), an educational designer, or perhaps an IT developer. Although para-analysis can be used to map the impact of technology, projects and events or initiatives over time in one dimension, it is more difficult to record and measure some of the hidden impacts. The corporate side of the University’s business saw the introduction of a series of new HR Performance Management schemes from 2007 to 2011 to promote the University’s focus on productivity and CPI (Continuous Process Improvement) and was used as a way to progress the objectives of the University Strategy. A Performance Based Funding scheme (2007-2010) was developed to improve output and personal improvement in research and teaching by setting compliance targets attached to funding for school and academic participation and output. The evidence suggests that there were compounding effects from the many changes in the University and the pressure associated with ‘performance’ and continuous improvement.

The learning environment as defined/understood by the University

It is useful be aware of the vision for the learning environment that is promoted by the University through its centralised strategic planning processes because this is the vision which is (usually) supported by operational and strategic plans and, to some extent, human and physical resourcing. This in turn can affect the effectiveness of improvements to the learning and teaching environment and the student experience. University strategic documentation gives something of the discourse which underpinned many of the management decisions at CSU during the time period under discussion and reveals the expectations of senior management with respect to learning and teaching outcomes. The term ‘learning environment’ per se is not used in the 2007-2011 CSU Strategy although there is a strong focus on the student learning experience. Objectives included the provision of flexible delivery of learning and teaching which:

- “Is supported by well-researched curriculum and teaching methodologies
- Uses research and technology to be flexible and responsive to student needs and feedback
- Provides shared learning spaces and teaching experiences for students on and off campus, and
- Builds communities of learning especially amongst dispersed students”.

(Charles Sturt University, 2006, p.3).

There were four key Plans which supported the CSU Strategy. The CSU Learning and Teaching Plan 2007-2011 provides an insight into some of the strategies proposed to help
the university achieve its vision for the learning environment. Objective Two of the Plan is the “Creation of a more accessible and effective learning environment”. Strategies to achieve this included: developing the flexible and distance learning resources of CSU, including the VLE, to enhance the learning environment; strengthening learning communities, including those which link on and off campus students, including through the Learning Commons; enhancing professional development in the use of the VLE/Flexible learning to empower academic staff to make better use of digital technologies to support learning in all modes; enhancing the inclusiveness of CSU’s learning environments, reviewing the university calendar to remove overlapping sessions; and refurbishing learning spaces at CSU to support flexible use of the VLE. (Internal document – CSU Learning and Teaching Plan 2007-2011. p.3. DVC (Academic))

A study into blended and flexible learning in practice which took place over four years 2005-2008 found that there is, however, something of a mismatch in the stated vision and objectives and how effective the University processes and structures are in enabling staff to meet those objectives (Buchan, Rafferty & Munday 2009). A valuable outcome of the research was identifying the organisational limitations and implications of blended and flexible learning in practice through the lived experience of the four year immersion in the study allowed the researchers practical insight into aspects which can inform future research and organisational decisions. In 2009 when the study and publications were completed, this was the reality of the University environment in which blended and flexible learning was taking place. Some of these limitations are briefly described below:

- Distance teaching and resource based blended learning approaches require a lot of personal input to engage students;
- academic fatigue can result in taking easy path of non-excellence [with respect to technology and teaching approaches];
- staffing changes and academic buy-out can compromise student feedback on assignments;
- current timetable systems do not accommodate flexible use of learning spaces [valid up to 2011];
- staffing allocations, and formulas for such, do not account for varying class sizes nor factor in the time taken to develop new resources;
- there is a lack of recognition of time investment required for flexible and blended learning;
- enrolment options [to support blended approaches] are limited [to internal or DE].

(adapted from Buchan, Rafferty & Munday, 2009)

This research was further developed for the 2011 DEHUB Summit paper; ‘Ten rules of thumb in blended and flexible learning: a study on pedagogies, challenges and changing perspectives’ (Buchan, Rafferty & Munday, 2009; Rafferty, Munday & Buchan, 2011) which included ‘considerations for an effective pedagogy for blended and flexible learning’ and a checklist of organisational limitations and implications for blended and flexible learning in practice.
Conclusion
Buchan’s (2011) study into learning technology unearthed a ‘chicken or the egg’ conundrum which can be extended to the wider study. Learning leaders cannot work in a vacuum and if they are to be effective, there needs to be reciprocal/mutual support within the university. More importantly, if the university is genuine about meaningful change in learning and teaching, it needs to be prepared to undergo significant transformation in a variety of areas.
References


