In FLITE conversations: Building a faculty-based centre to support Information Technology Education

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Abstract: *The FLITE (Facilitated Learning for Information Technology Education) Centre was formally established in May 2001 within the Faculty of Information Technology. Its mission is to develop a collaborative environment that fosters quality teaching and student-centred learning across all eight Schools of the Faculty. This requires a shift in values and processes, and an attitudinal change from an organization where individuals work in isolation, to one where communication, collaboration, sharing of ideas and building common resources form an integral part of the academic culture. For a Centre to be effective in achieving such attitudinal change, a continual dialogue between all members of the Faculty is required. It is the FLITE Centre's role to initiate such conversations and support the resultant actions and projects that emerge. This paper outlines the types of conversations needed and the associated work of the Centre that has arisen from such conversations, in the hope of providing an approach to effecting change in the teaching and learning environment.*

Keywords: *teaching support, change management, dialogue*

Introduction

The purpose of the FLITE (Facilitated Learning for Information Technology Education) Centre is to develop a collaborative environment to foster quality teaching and student-centred learning. This is a process of attitude change away from individuals working in isolation with the resultant heavy workloads and duplication of effort attendant upon such an approach, to one of collaboration, sharing of ideas, building common resources and developing curriculum based on similarity rather than difference.
This paper outlines the various types of conversations needed and the associated work of the Centre that has arisen from such conversations. It proposes that such conversations can be the change agents that achieve a shift in focus from the individual to the group. With conversations as the focus, the emphasis is on building relationships essential for collaborative work, rather than on tasks or curriculum development, which may degenerate into segmented work when workloads and physical separation put pressure on the cohesiveness of the team.

What is the FLITE Centre?

The FLITE Centre was formed as an initiative of Monash University's Faculty of Information Technology and became a formal Faculty Centre in May 2001. FLITE stands for "Facilitated Learning for Information Technology Education". This Centre was formed in response to the Faculty's recognition of the need to support students and staff in the area of education in their endeavour to achieve excellence, while promoting the University's desire for student-centred flexible learning (Monash Plan, 2000). It was recognised that collaborative approaches were needed to meet the economic demands of the University while still striving for excellence and innovation in teaching and encouraging the use of technology to support student-centred flexible learning. It currently has a Director (academic), one full-time academic and a half-time administrator.

The main purpose of the FLITE Centre is to create a collaborative environment to foster excellence in teaching. Faculty members are supported to develop flexible learning strategies that promote a more student-centred approach. Flexible learning includes the traditional arenas of face-to-face teaching and learning as well as on-line learning and the use of educational technologies. It also includes the facilitation of the learning process, hence the use of the term “Facilitated” rather than “Flexible” in the acronym of the Centre.

Approach to engendering change

Such a move to a more collaborative approach of development as well as a focus shift to a student-centred approach will, for many academics, require a considerable shift in attitude in their approach to teaching and their students' learning outcomes. It will require not only a change in curriculum development practice, but also a shift in perspective of their role as sole expert to that of facilitator. Such attitudinal change requires a shift in beliefs, expenditure of time and energy by the person required to change and a willingness to accept change as a challenge to be embraced rather than an imposed direction. It is already recognised that organisational change relies heavily on language and dialogue. Strati (1998) acknowledges that language is a key factor in engaging and mobilising people to embrace change. Butcher and Atkinson (2000) indicate that communication is an essential part of the change process and the appropriate management of language can be influential in legitimizing the approach to change, particularly for directing change through paths other than via a "top-down" approach. Ford and Ford (1995) take this approach a step further by proposing that communication not only occurs in the context of change, but can also be a tool to effect and drive change. Collaborative work requires considerable relationship building, which forms around conversation and dialogue. This dialogue assists staff to build narratives around their teaching that help them take ownership of the changes required, and eventually engender a willingness to let go of their position as sole expert to one of collaborator and facilitator. It occurs in a number of ways and between a variety of groups within, and external to, the Faculty.

Conversations

In the following sections, a number of conversations are described, the reasons for the conversation occurring are given and examples of outcomes and projects such conversations have engendered are presented.

Exploratory conversations

The FLITE Centre's role is to meet the needs of the staff it purports to support, therefore, to be effective, it must engage in exploratory conversations to determine the needs of the Faculty’s staff. Such conversations assist in the acceptance of change engendered by these needs. Staff

see any proposed changes as necessary to provide for their needs and feel a part of the change process. Without such conversations, changes would be viewed as an imposition from outside groups and acceptance would be less likely.

Needs analysis

The FLITE Centre conducted a detailed needs analysis prior to its formal ratification to determine what its focus should be and what were appropriate issues to address. A meeting was held with appropriate representatives from each School.

A number of key areas emerged for the FLITE Centre to focus on. These were:

1. The creation of a Faculty collaborative learning community to support the development of flexibility in both the delivery and learning aspects of units, with the appropriate use of educational technologies.
2. The creation of a database of staff profiles that includes expertise and interests in subject area, teaching practice and use and development of educational technology and techniques. This database will be used to assist in the establishment of collaborative teams and to build a collegial approach to curriculum development and educational practice.
3. The provision of support for staff members related to teaching, flexible learning and the use of educational technologies.

This analysis enabled the Centre to develop appropriate objectives and establish a number of approaches for meeting the needs of the staff of the Faculty.

Focus Groups and Review Groups

For projects undertaken by the FLITE Centre, focus and review groups are set up to ensure that outcomes of the projects are met. They also ensure that, where Schools have differing needs, these are catered for (e.g. for tutor development, some Schools run laboratory tutorials while others run discussion tutorials). These groups include all relevant parties. For example, the tutor development program has both academic and tutor focus groups, while the masters by coursework project has both staff and students involved.

Intimate Conversations

Intimate conversations (i.e. one-to-one conversations between a FLITE Centre staff member and a Faculty academic) occur to facilitate attitude change from the "bottom up". For a support Centre to be effective, users need to feel personally connected to the Centre staff and feel confident that their particular needs will be addressed. Intimate conversations also engender a sense of value in a staff member's work, encouraging the embracing of new ideas, making acceptance of new possibilities more likely and increasing the level of willingness to be part of projects the FLITE Centre undertakes. The components identified as a result of engaging in intimate conversations are:

- **The teaching approach of the academic**. This ensures that support and facilitation matches the teaching style of the academic (e.g. a problem-based learning workshop for an academic with a linear didactic teaching style would be inappropriate).
- **The academic's attitude to collaboration**. For a staff member whose preference is to be a sole developer, then individual assistance would be the place to start, with a move over time to more collaborative approaches. If, however, a staff member prefers to work collaboratively, this person would be noted as a likely candidate for collaborative projects as a starting point.
- **Common interests**. Centre staff can identify those with a common interest (e.g. content, problems, teaching approach) and personally link those people together. This makes the development of collaborative projects far easier and more effective, as staff contacted personally are more likely to engage in a project or attend a workshop than if contacted

through an impersonal general announcement. It also reduces the isolation that a Faculty spread over seven campuses can create.

- **Teaching skills**. Teaching tips and techniques that academics can share will be identified more easily when the conversation centres on the individual. This sharing of tips and techniques further fosters collegiality within the Faculty.

Formal Conversations

When work at the Centre impacts upon policy, a "top-down" approach is needed that complements the "bottom-up" approach characterized by work with individuals or small groups. This "top-down" approach establishes policy so that appropriate authority can support the activities of the Centre. For example, a tutor development program will only work with the support of the Schools that employ those tutors. By working for attitude change at both top and bottom levels, any change is more likely to be effective. Three types of formal conversations occur to ensure this "top-down" influence occurs.

Conversations with Heads of Schools

For policies relating to teaching and learning, the FLITE Centre must work in concert with the decision making structure of the University, in particular at Faculty level. The Faculty of Information Technology consists of eight Schools on seven campuses (two outside Australia). While the FLITE Centre is a Faculty centre that reports directly to the Dean, it is within the Schools that budget and staffing decisions are made. Formal conversations must occur with Heads of Schools, both individually and as a group (either through the Dean's Advisory Committee or Faculty Board).

For example, collaborative development of units across Schools within the Faculty is difficult to achieve if only done at the lecturer level. Schools are often competing for the same students, and collaboration may be seen as a threat. Changes to the budgetary model and rewards for collaborative practice through the formal School channels are necessary to encourage staff to undertake such collaborative projects.

Conversations with the Associate Dean Teaching

The Associate Dean Teaching (ADT) is the accepted formal authority for teaching decisions within a Faculty. The FLITE Centre staff work closely with the ADT, often doing the on-ground work and acting as the ADT's representative on various University committees.

Conversations with the Faculty Education Committee

The Faculty Education Committee (FEC) is the formal authority within the Faculty for education related decisions. The FLITE Centre attends FEC meetings to ensure Centre involvement in all formal education-based decisions within the Faculty. This forum also affords opportunities to highlight issues that need addressing. For example, a process of improving unit descriptions and the associated task of curriculum design considerations has been instituted through issues highlighted by a FLITE Centre staff member at an FEC meeting.

Bridge building conversations

These conversations occur to ensure the Faculty works within the University structure and policy guidelines, and is informed of initiatives within other Faculties and at the University level.

- **Conversations with other faculty centres**. There are a number of faculty-based centres that have a focus on teaching and learning. Currently Education, Law, Engineering and Information Technology meet regularly to discuss education issues

that impinge across the whole University. When these common issues emerge that require a University solution, these Faculty groups have a better lobbying base to achieve suitable outcomes than they would if acting alone.

- **Conversations with university groups.** Conversations with university based groups that support teaching and learning and staff development are crucial. For example, the University has taken on board the use of WebCT as its preferred Online Course Management System. The Higher Education Unit has employed people with specific expertise in this area. Working with such people enables the FLITE Centre to utilise a broader range of expertise and still develop faculty-specific solutions and support mechanisms for the use of such a system. Other units, such as the Language and Learning Services Unit, provide expertise the FLITE Centre doesn't have through membership of reference groups (e.g. tutor development program) or project groups (e.g. Masters support materials development).

Connecting Conversations

While bridge building conversations provide a broader framework for the FLITE Centre's work, connecting conversations bring together the common threads across different Schools and groups **within** the Faculty. This not only fosters collaboration, but also enables the establishment of projects that build common resources across similar subject areas. Each School in the Faculty has a different computing focus (e.g. Computer Science, Software Engineering, Network Computing), yet for each subject area overlap exists. The development of common resources (e.g. case study materials, exercises, learning objects) can reduce overall workloads yet still allow units to retain their particular computing flavour. Common needs across the Schools can also be identified (e.g. the need for tutor development). Connecting conversations identify such needs and help build connections between groups of staff that might otherwise be overlooked in the day-to-day work within a School. For example, a conversation over a conference dinner between academics teaching in the various Masters by Coursework degrees highlighted issues relating to lack of professional and language skills in Masters students. This prompted the FLITE Centre to run a "Masters by Coursework Issues" workshop, and, as a result, a project to support the development of professional and English language skills is underway.

Mentoring conversations

Formal mentoring conversations allow dialogue between a more skilled, experienced person and a less experienced person. The mentor provides professional support and acts as a role model of the knowledge, skills and attitudes valued by the University. Mentoring relationships can offer direct assistance and guidance in professional development planning, through conversations that motivate, teach, counsel and promote (Zachary, 2000). Mentoring conversations through the FLITE Centre focus on the individual's teaching practice. Long-term goals of the Centre are:

- The design and development of a program that supports academics in developing mentoring roles
- The brokering of appropriate mentoring relationships across the Faculty
- The development of a scheme that allows academics to complete a secondment within the Centre to improve their skills for teaching and learning and then act as mentors in their own Schools

Facilitation Conversations

A facilitator has the role of encouraging open dialogue amongst individuals with different perceptions so that diverse assumptions, opinions and options can be explored (Heron, 1999).

The FLITE Centre staff are well placed to act as facilitators as they do not have a personal vested interest in a particular unit or course, and are not directly bound by the authority of any particular School. One such project where the FLITE Centre staff develop facilitation conversations is in the team building process for learning studio units.

Observer conversations

Because the FLITE Centre staff own no allegiance to a particular School they can be objective about the various aspects of education development within the Faculty. Yet they also have credibility while retaining this objective observer status, as they are part of the Faculty. The FLITE Centre is able to make observations and offer possible insights into the situation. An example of this is the FLITE Centre's role as observer of the process of development of a School's transition program.

Broadening conversations

The FLITE Centre's position within the Faculty, outside the Schools yet working with all Schools, enables them to gain a broad perspective of the issues. They can often provide an alternative perspective to a situation, as they are not bound by the strictures of a School, yet still operate in line with Faculty policy. This has been true of discussions of plagiarism issues across the Faculty.

Informing Conversations

One of the important steps to developing a collaborative community is the sharing of information across areas of potential collaboration. With a Faculty spread across 7 campuses, activities and developments occur within one School that might benefit others or should involve collaboration from other Schools. Many academics are unaware of what others are doing (and don't have the time to find out) or what is going on in the teaching and learning environment in the wider community. A large number of academics have an interest in teaching, but it is not their main focus. They would, however, be quite prepared to attend a seminar or workshop if they knew it was on. The FLITE Centre provides this service through a comprehensive web site and a monthly electronic newsletter. The website (http://www-flite.infotech.monash.edu.au) provides information on conferences, seminars, contact groups, training courses and visiting people in the tertiary education environment. The newsletter highlights current events, activities and items of interest for that month. The Centre also has a resource library of journals, conference proceedings and books relating to teaching and learning that Faculty staff can borrow.

Broadcast conversations

Broadcast conversations focus on the dissemination of information about activities occurring in the Faculty. These focus on an exchange of information through the provision of a variety of arenas where information can be shared at a broader level and issues discussed. This is achieved through three arenas.

- **Issues workshops for specific groups**. These workshops are intended to draw together those directly involved with the issues and facilitate discussion around those of issues (e.g. Masters Issues Workshop). Sometimes the FLITE Centre suggests these workshops, other times they arise from outside conversations. One staff member described his experience of such a workshop as cathartic. Being given the opportunity to meet and share with others facing similar issues in a facilitated environment can provide the necessary impetus to tackle the issues rather than being overwhelmed by them.
- **Open forums**. This arena provides an opportunity for discussion within a broader, yet still structured, environment. For example, the tutor development forum provides an

opportunity for particular perspectives to be presented (i.e. the role of the assistant lecturer, the tutor's perspective), for the FLITE Centre to inform staff of their work in the area, and for "birds-of-a-feather" sessions to be run to discuss issues relating to the topic.

- **Faculty symposia**. A Faculty symposium allows for staff to present their work to others in the Faculty and to share in meaningful discussion on a range of education related issues that impact specifically on the Faculty. The concept of a conference or symposium is not new, however faculties rarely do this for the education platform. Conference attendance tends to be reserved for research areas and education conferences or even university conferences tend to be too broad.
  The FLITE Centre has its first Symposium scheduled for November 2002. The format includes a series of presentations followed by discussion on thematic areas in the morning, followed by round-table discussions in the afternoon. Faculty staff have an opportunity to suggest topics for discussion and to present their work in this field.

Expert conversations

The FLITE Centre provides educational expertise within the Information Technology (IT) discipline framework. The Director of the Centre has worked as an IT academic for more than 15 years and has both IT and Education qualifications. The other academic in the Centre has Education and Counselling qualifications providing both education and facilitation expertise. Thus, the Centre staff understand the nature of the IT discipline and issues inherent within that discipline, as well as having expertise in the field of Education. This also validates the expertise the Centre provides. Academics do not have to explain terminology or the nature of the content they teach. This also means that FLITE Centre staff will regularly be invited to sit on School or Faculty committees as they are seen to be part of the Faculty. For example, a FLITE Centre staff member is on a School plagiarism committee.

Expertise, of course, is also present in the Faculty academics themselves. A scheme to allow academics who have a particular interest in education to complete a six month's secondment to the Centre to work on particular projects or issues, is currently being discussed. Such a scheme would have the added benefit of that staff member returning to their own School to assist others with educational aspects of their work.

The FLITE Centre is also in a position to supervise research students, and to provide secondment teaching into the Schools of the Faculty. This ensures FLITE Centre staff remain current in their understanding of teaching and learning issues within the Faculty through first hand experience.

Conclusion

Table 1 provides a summary of the conversations described, their purpose in occurring, projects they have engendered, and how they have supported the change from individual to collaborative work.

Conversation type	**Purpose in occurring**	**Example**	**How they have supported shift from individual to collaborative work**
Exploratory	Determine needs of staff	Needs analysis meetings, focus groups	Staff see needs are met and value input from Centre
	Evaluate projects	Project review groups	
Intimate	Determine teaching approach and skills, attitude to	Interviews for development of staff	Engenders change from “bottom-up” by personalizing

Conversation type	Purpose in occurring	Example	How they have supported shift from individual to collaborative work
	collaboration, common interests of individual	database	the Centre and valuing the individual
Formal	Effect policy change through management levels and formal channels	Meetings with Heads of Schools, ADT, and Faculty Education Committee	Engenders change from "top-down" and lends authority to Centre
Bridge Building	Fit Faculty policies and work within University policies and share information	Meetings with Faculty Centres that perform a similar role to the FLITE Centre	Provides a better lobbying base for University wide change. Allows collaboration across Faculties and use of expertise from other areas
Connecting	Connect staff within the Faculty	Tutor development program	Identifies possible areas of collaboration and common problems or issues
Mentoring	Provide personal support to improve teaching practice	Provision of mentoring to improve teaching practice	Helps in motivating and promoting the individual – engenders a willingness to work with others
Facilitation	Enables differing perceptions and opinions to be explored	Facilitation of team development for learning studios	Builds an awareness of the value of others and the benefits of collaboration
Observing	Provides objective insights	School Transition program	Enables a different viewpoint to be seen
Broadening	Presents the "big picture"	Meetings of Faculty Board	Provides view of the Schools as elements of a larger Faculty
Informing	Provides Education information to staff	Website, newsletter, resource library	Encourages awareness of Educational matters
Broadcast	Provides arenas for exchange of Education information	Workshops, open forums, symposia	Provides an opportunity to share ideas and information
Expert	Provide, and exploit, expertise within the Faculty	Workshops, secondment scheme	Promotes collegiality through provision of peer expertise

Table 1: Summary of FLITE Centre conversations

As can be seen in Table 1, the FLITE Centre bases much of the impetus for its work around these conversations. These have been instrumental in providing support for educational and attitudinal change, and have often been the impetus for driving the move to a more student-centred collaborative approach to learning with the Faculty.

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