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E-Learning Summer School: a case study

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Abstract

In 2003, the then Learning Technology Team at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) ran, for the first time, a week-long boot camp-type event for its academic staff to facilitate their engagement with technology enhanced learning. That year over fifty academics attended the week which encompassed an innovative combination of workshops and reflective sessions exploring both existing and new technologies and their practical applications with students. The week was such a success that the E-Learning Summer School became a fixed event in the institute's academic calendar. As an event it has gone from strength to strength, attracting a lot of outside interest. In recent years it has grown to become the Dublin E-Learning Summer School run by DIT under the auspices of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA). It is a model of good practice and this case study tells its story.

Introduction



Figure 1: DIT's six campus sites

The Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) is one of the largest Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in Ireland, with over 2,000 members of staff, 1545 of whom are academic staff, and approximately 20,000 registered students, 20% of whom come from outside the country. The institution is spread across six campus sites in the city centre at present (Figure 1) but is due to relocate to one new education and research campus by 2016. Recognised as having led the way in technological higher education in this country, DIT currently offers a wide range of apprenticeship, ordinary degree, honours degree, masters and doctoral programmes.

In response to the broad variety of technological, social, and economic challenges facing all HEIs as they moved into the new millennium, DIT adopted a fifteen-year Strategic Plan in 2001, supported by a series of three-year operational plans. The plan recognised that in order to survive and prosper DIT must meet these aforementioned challenges head-on and embrace the opportunities offered by them (DIT 2001, p.4). Within this plan e-learning featured many times as a possible method through which the various strategic objectives could be achieved and supported, prompting the Technical Working Group overseeing its implementation to recommend the establishment of a Learning Technology Team (LTT) to work alongside the existing Learning and Teaching Centre (LTC) to support and develop e-learning at DIT. Subsequently, a five-person team was established in 2002 with the expectation that, by 2005, 50% of the programmes at the institute would have a

virtual presence using the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) WebCT™ to enhance learning and teaching. It was also expected that the team would assist DIT staff in realising the potential of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for producing pedagogically sound e-learning materials; and that they would keep abreast of all local, national and international developments in the area.

In January 2009 the LTT and the LTC merged to form the Learning, Teaching and Technology Centre (LTTC) whose aim is to develop, support and facilitate good teaching and learning practices across the institute.



Figure 2: Members of DIT's LTTC (July 2011) <http://www.dit.ie/lttc>

Staff Contact and Training

In an effort to counteract the popular notion amongst academics new to e-learning that it is a technological solution rather than a pedagogical innovation (Salmon 2005, p.205), we focused our training efforts in our first academic year at DIT (2002/2003) very specifically on the pedagogical aspects of e-learning. A suite of interactive workshops entitled “Planning your WebCT™ course”, “Designing Online Learning Materials”, “Online Assessment”, “Using Communication Tools”, and “Does E-Learning Work for You?”, were designed, developed and run, each of which aimed to show how the technology could be used most effectively as a teaching tool. The feedback from these workshops was very positive showing that the participants were really beginning to engage with the necessary issues.

In that first year we made contact with 289 academic staff through both workshops and one-to-one consultations and 150 WebCT™ modules in total were developed. This represented a growth rate of over 100% within six months with numbers increasing on a weekly basis. However, it took 32 individual workshops and a host of consultations in order to make contact with, and train, those 289 academic staff, showing an average of only nine attendees per workshop out of a workforce of over 1545 academics, which is really quite low. Despite the apparent enthusiasm about the e-learning project, staff members also often cancelled their places at these workshops at short notice for a wide variety of reasons, or contacted us to inquire as to whether previously run workshops would be rerun on a different day/week/month.

Wednesday afternoons are the only time I'm free to attend workshops I'm afraid.

I just don't have the time this semester for anything else! I'll see next semester.

That workshop sounds great. I can't go this week but maybe the next time you run it.

Interestingly, such comments are not unique to DIT. A survey carried out in 2008 of universities in the United Kingdom found that the ‘lack of time’ was “overwhelmingly identified as the most significant barrier inhibiting academic engagement” with ICTs (Browne and Jenkins, 2008). It is also significant to note that some DIT staff attended the more basic planning or introductory workshops more than once if a period of time had lapsed since their initial training after which they had not managed to immerse themselves in the whole notion of using ICTs with their students and get a WebCT™ module up and running. We needed a different approach to give these interested but struggling academics a chance to devote the required time and effort to begin the journey of enhancing their teaching through technology.

So, in early 2003 the idea of running a week-long boot camp-type event was proposed to run at the end of June.

The First DIT E-Learning Summer School



Figure 3: Snapshots of the E-Learning Summer School 2003

When it was first suggested by Dr. Kevin O'Rourke, Head of E-Learning Support and Development at DIT, to run a week long e-learning summer school at the end of June 2003 he was told it would never work. It was certainly an approach that had never been taken at the institute before and questions as to whether any academics would attend at all were raised. Nevertheless, plans were put in place and that first e-learning summer school was a resounding success. While the week was conceived initially as a way of providing staff members with an opportunity to attend WebCT™ workshops that they had missed during the previous academic year it quickly morphed into more of an 'event' where participants could register for the entire

week. Through a combination of workshops, guest speakers, and hands-on WebCT™ training, participants could totally immerse themselves in existing and emerging learning technologies. They also got an opportunity to discuss how best they could utilise those technologies with their students to enhance and enrich the learning and teaching experience.

It was a very appropriate time at which to offer such a unique experience. There was a growing fear at that time amongst academics in the higher education sector in relation to the possibility of their jobs being displaced by the introduction of ICTs. This was also coupled with some concern towards the demands implementing them was putting on their time and limited resources and the fact that this was remaining largely unrecognised. The summer school gave them a chance to meet with like-minded peers, dispel their fears, and become reliably informed as to what the technologies could do for them. Interestingly, eight years on the literature shows that some academics still perceive ICTs "as a threat rather than an opportunity" that puts them "out of their comfort zone" (O'Rourke 2010, p.xxii), and so there is still a huge demand for events such as an e-learning summer school, particularly in light of the increasingly pervasive adoption of technology in life and learning (HEFCE 2007, p.5). Our incoming students do not see e-learning as a separate or special activity but rather expect it to be an integral part of their learning process (HEFCE 2007, p.4/5; Concannon et al. 2005, p.511), and academics must be ready to rise to this challenge.

The proposed mixed e-learning summer school programme proved very popular and quite suddenly there was a high demand for places, so much so that it even necessitated a venue change. We chose to move to an open flexible space that served as the main event area and which was adaptable to different purposes during the week. We found that such a space encouraged a collegiate and collaborative atmosphere.



Figure 4: Summer School workshops

Purely from an administrative perspective, we limited the size of the cohort to approximately 55 in number and feedback from the participants both on that and subsequent years has meant that we have stuck with that number since. We questioned it again this year but still 72% of the participants disagreed that the summer school might be better if more people attended with one noting "I think the numbers were about right - enough to be able to get a wide variety of subject areas, disciplines and approaches but not too wide that it became anonymous". Another participant even thought that if anything there were too many participants and suggested the number should be smaller by saying "Too many people, not enough interaction".

There was strong outside interest in participating in the summer school that first year also but our focus was on devoting time to DIT staff specifically, and so places were not held for anyone outside of the institute. People from outside DIT did participate in subsequent years however, and the benefits of that will be referred to at a later point in this case study.

The overall theme of the week that year was "What is e-learning?" with Monday to Thursday being themed around the particular topics "planning", "learning", "designing", and implementing", while Friday was devoted to using WebCT™ as a tutor specifically. The morning workshops took a blended approach to theory and practice and these were led by the LTT in collaboration with DIT staff with expertise in the area. The afternoon sessions were facilitated by external experts in a fashion that encouraged reflection and dialogue on pertinent issues such as intellectual property and copyright, disability, technology and culture, and alternate approaches to learning. Irish based speakers were invited only to make all references to policy and practice completely relevant to the participants and the Irish context. Lunch was provided each day, and an informal wine reception drew the afternoon sessions to a close with each facilitating lively discussions and debates on the days' topics. As the week went on, the importance of including such social aspects in the proceedings became increasingly obvious as the participants valued yet another chance to exchange views, offer opinions and forge links in a slightly more informal setting. The materials used throughout the week, including presentations, were made available to the participants through a WebCT™ module to which they were each given access for a period of approximately two months. The module had been designed so as to demonstrate best practice and during the week became an important tool in a way in which had not been expected initially. For example, the discussion board in that module became a back-channel for the week much like Twitter® does now at such events, and links were shared and information disseminated in that way over and above the topics to which we had limited ourselves on the week's programme.

The feedback from the week was very constructive and the participants found the week of huge value. So, as an e-learning event, it had certainly served its purpose, and was worth the months of time and effort on behalf of the team to plan, organise and run it. Without any hesitation it was decided to make the E-Learning Summer School an annual event at DIT.

Flexibility is Key

Each year saw the summer school building on past experiences and feedback. In 2004 the breadth of the reflective sessions was widened featuring talks from the industry sector (Skool.ie™ and Intel®), the commercial third level sector (Hibernia College), the community

(Digital Community Project), and the third level library sector (eprint Experience at NUIM). Furthermore, it was the first time non-DIT staff attended and that was a big contributing factor to the success of that year's school. Individuals from organisations such as the Defence Forces, FÁS, Teagasc, and the Government's Department of Finance, as well as academics from other Irish third level institutes brought a unique perspective to the event that year. It also led to varied yet overwhelmingly positive feedback, even if one particular session was deemed both the best and the worst of the week!

Based on both the formal feedback and informal chats with the participants from the 2003 and 2004 schools, the programme for the e-learning summer school in 2005 saw the introduction of optional lunchtime sessions that participants could sign up for and that addressed very specific needs such as "Build your own webpage", "Add sound to PowerPoint™" and "Build an online assessment". The usual day-long WebCT™ training on the Friday was also split into introductory and advanced streams to accommodate some of the DIT staff attending who, two years into DIT's e-learning initiative, had become more proficient at WebCT™ and wished to delve into the more advanced tools and settings. This was also the first year that a Summer School Dinner was organised for the Thursday evening. The idea of including a dinner as part of the week added a new dimension to the event over which genuine links were forged and friendships made and so the dinner has remained as a permanent fixture on the week's programme since.

DIT e-Learning Summer School 2003 Feedback	
General Comments on week as a whole	
	Very well organised
	An excellent course. Less theory needed though & more practical WebCT sessions
	Very enjoyable course & pleasant tutors
	Tutors/lecturers very helpful
	Very helpful; hands-on parts moved too quick
	Very happy with content and delivery
	Could you please leave the WebCT courses we built up on Friday for a few weeks as I am going on holidays but would like to review this on my return
	This was a great idea to have a week of e-Learning, I found it extraordinarily helpful to see, hear and discuss these topics with a range of different people, and getting a range of different views. Everyone who helped put this stuff together deserves loads of thanks. p.s. if you need help from the School of Computing's eLearning Research Group: http://www.comp.dit.ie/e-learn/
	Overall an excellent course, a little difficult to remember at this stage the details of the week, learnt a lot and a great experience.
	I was very impressed by the breadth of the course and by the fact that it wasn't just a training session on the tool, but addressed a lot of the wider issues surrounding elearning in general. Excellent course!
	The Summer School was well worth doing and provided a thorough grounding in e-learning as it related to the DIT
	Very enjoyable and worthwhile course
	WebCT appears extremely complex. It takes several sessions before one (my experience) can get to grips with the concepts. Getting a starting point is the key and I'm not fully confident that I can get past this stage without undue effort. Week was generally good in terms of theory and practice mix. Best session - Tony Murray
	Suggest training day towards start of the week next time. Group really gelled after the Thursday morning session - fun with chat & discussion!
	Every effort was made to facilitate the students.
	Condense, ensure guest lecturers structure presentations more closely to the e-learning theme
	I think more hands on time with WebCT early in the week would have helped people put the theory in context. I think this would help the theory aspects of the courses gel a little better. As it ran, interesting as it was, I felt it was a little fragmented. This comment should not take away from the excellent work put in by the delivery team. Congratulations to all involved and many thanks for all your hard work.
	Really enjoyed it, thanks.

Figure 5: Feedback from the E-Learning Summer School 2003

DIT e-Learning Summer School 2004 Feedback
General Comments on week as a whole
- Well done and hope there will be another e-Learning School every year from now on!
- Overall very good. Made things very clear.
- Very good over all. Nice to use the library and have such a large group together. Very good use of the two big screens as well for demonstrations although perhaps they should be linked to the same laptop so as not to confuse people.
- Liked it - very worthwhile.
- Have very much enjoyed the week. I attended the one-day training course previously and am delighted that I did both - to really try to assimilate it all, improve my ideas (and meagre skills!). Thanks to you all, keep up the good work and thanks for your obvious support which I will most definitely avail of soon!
- All in all excellent! I was greatly impressed by the obvious preparation that went into the course and the pleasant efficient manner of all the training staff. It makes me proud that such a team is associated with the DIT.
- Enjoyable course.
- Wow, lots to learn. Gave us a good basis to learn more on our own. We will probably need to do a lot of self-teaching later.
- Staff very supportive and helpful - much appreciated. Thanks.
- Excellent. Time well spent. Thanks.
- The week was great. I gained most out of the morning sessions, but know that you have to have that philosophical element in the afternoon to help all to assimilate. Also was quite tired in afternoons. I am not sure if some more hands on would work better earlier in the week. Thanks to you all, have enjoyed it thoroughly and it has opened my eyes to what we should have been doing before now.
- This week was excellent. Maybe if the detailed instruction on WebCT was given earlier in the week so that students could have more time to work around the area and discuss problems with staff.
- I found the week very helpful, not just from a WebCT point of view but also from a teaching perspective.
- Quality of speakers and relevance of topic is very important. It was great to meet Dr. Sean and also to hear about the DISC project. All LTT staff are fantastic. We as students were a little tired after our end of year sessions. The availability of the course to outside agencies is very encouraging. In terms of productivity I would like to propose that you make follow-up phone call to the DIT people to encourage/help us to get started. This could also include an invite to view some ?????
- All in all very good indeed!
- I would have preferred that there was a more practical slant on the week-long course, as I have done a lot of thinking on learning and teaching matters and I teach design. Overall the speakers were excellent and a really good insight to how industry and other learning programmes are using technology in education.
- I feel a bit frustrated. The site is open for the summer. I could use it more profitably if I had a booklet like the OADL.
- The week was very informative and enjoyable, even though I wasn't able to attend every session. The team running the course were helpful and approachable.
- In general the content was appropriate and useful.
- Very worthwhile and enjoyable. A packed programme, but extremely well-organised. The enthusiasm for the project shines through. Thanks for all the organising.
- Overall a good week - nice mix of hands-on work and lectures
- I think the training was excellent. Thank you Kevin, Frances, Pauline, Alan, Dolores and Ken (hope I forgot no-one!)

Figure 6: Feedback from the E-Learning Summer School 2004

The key to such a successful annual event is being flexible enough to adapt it year on year to focus on pertinent issues, thereby keeping it exciting and relevant. In September 2008 DIT upgraded its VLE to Blackboard CE6™ and, in order to prepare for this significant change, the e-learning summer school in 2008 limited its numbers to 25 DIT staff concentrating heavily on the new platform with the participants attending intensive workshops over the week, receiving full training on the new system. Some time for reflection was included however with a panel discussion on the Thursday afternoon in which some DIT students participated giving a commentary on e-learning practice at DIT from their perspective.

In 2009 the summer school returned to its original format providing a hands-on experience but with the added expectation that year that by the end of the week the participants would have the basic elements of an online module in place. Again, non-DIT academics joined the group as well as members of the Irish Police training college and trainers from the Irish Payroll Association.



Figure 7: E-Learning Summer School 2009

However, it was 2010 that saw DIT's E-Learning Summer School exceed all expectations to become the first ever Dublin E-Learning Summer School under the auspices of the Dublin Region Higher Education Alliance (DRHEA).



The DRHEA is a strategic alliance of eight HE institutions in the wider Dublin area, created to strengthen Dublin's HE sector "as an important contribution to the growth of Dublin's competitive advantage in a European and broader international context" (www.dhrea.ie). As well as setting out to help academics become aware of trends and innovations in e-learning and how to incorporate them into their teaching, the alliance also aspires to foster collaboration across Dublin's higher education colleges and to stimulate thought towards a vision for e-learning in the Dublin region. This pointed to extending the DIT E-Learning Summer school to become a wider Dublin event. The week was opened by the Lord Mayor of Dublin and closed with a keynote by Professor Tom Collins (NUI, Maynooth) on "The Graduate of 2015". Twitter® was introduced as a back channel for the first time and a diverse group of external followers got involved adding yet another dimension to the discussions. The main sessions were streamed and subsequently archived online. The week was a huge success and demonstrated that

Figure 8: Members of the DRHEA

the idea of a summer school had a much wider appeal across a range of institutions. A review of the feedback survey shows that the week exceeded expectations for 65% of the participants, while 100% of them found the week a worthwhile experience, a good use of their time, and that they would recommend it to a colleague.

In response to suggestions made by the participants of 2010, it was possible for the 2011 participants to earn five credits through the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS) for attending the week if they fulfilled additional assessment criteria. There was a lot of interest in this element of the week and it would appear to have been a welcome addition but at the time of writing (August 2011) its inclusion has yet to be evaluated. Furthermore, this

summer's cohort requested a follow up two-day event mid academic year so that they could renew their enthusiasm, strengthen links forged, and report on progress made since the summer school. So, plans for a 2 two-day Winter School, to be hosted by one of the other DRHEA member institutions, is currently in the initial planning stage.



Figure 9: Lord Mayor of Dublin Gerry Breen and members of the DRHEA open the Dublin E-Learning Summer School 2011

Evaluation and Conclusion

On the first day of the 2011 summer school we received a tweet (see Figure 9) from a past participant encouraging that week's cohort to get as much as they could from the event because it had completely shifted her perspective on teaching. It served as a welcome confirmation that the summer school is worthwhile and genuinely helps improve academic engagement with learning technologies and has a discernible impact in the classrooms.

Participants have also often emailed us after the event to express their thanks and to let us know what they got from the week. One that we received this year reads:

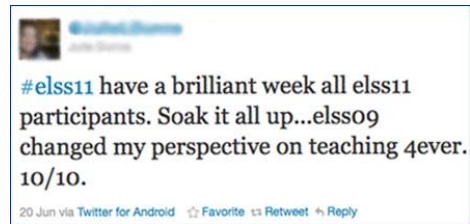


Figure 10: A tweet from a past participant of the E-Learning Summer School (elss)

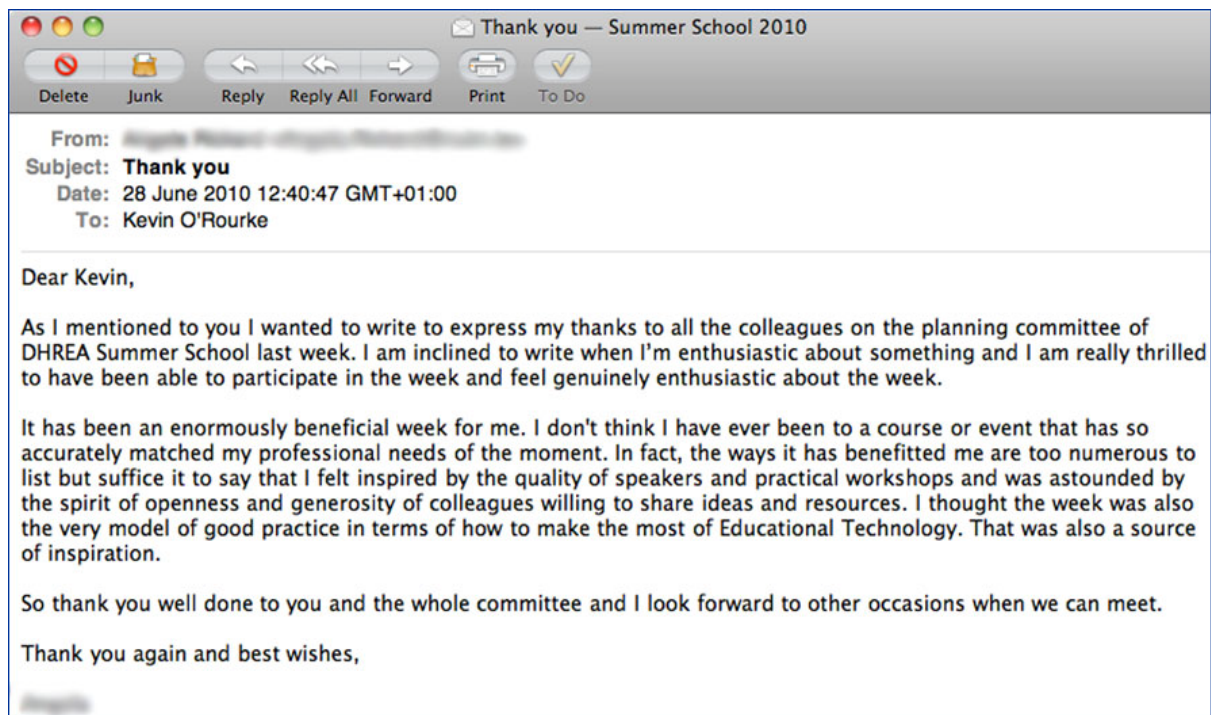


Figure 11: A thank you email from a 2011 participant

A more systematic review carried out recently with a number of past participants of the summer school, to ascertain in more detail the direct impact that it has in enhancing the learning experience of the student, revealed that without having the chance to immerse themselves in the technologies and consider their place in the learning and teaching environment, many lecturers would either never use them at all or only use them in a very superficial way. Comments from four of those surveyed are given below (see Figure 13).



Figure 12: The impact of the Summer School on learning and teaching

We also get plenty of critical and constructive feedback each year too, for example, "the round-table was, with respect, a complete waste of time", "this is an e-learning summer school, flip charts should be incinerated on sight", and "workshop facilitators should be given tight guidelines about workshop outcomes". Such comments are also taken on board and help shape the summer school the following year.

So, from very humble beginnings the E-Learning Summer School has grown into an extremely successful venture that is highly effective at engaging both technologically adept and technologically reluctant academic staff in the use of technology, empowering them to excel. We believe that the summer school is not only currently unique but a model that could be replicated easily, and not just in Ireland but internationally. To that end we are actively holding it up as a model of best practice and have begun presenting it at conferences and in publications and would be delighted to speak with any institution wishing to design and develop their own.

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