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Enabling Practitioners to Apply eLearning to Professional Development Practice

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Abstract

With this increasing drive towards the use of technology in higher education teaching practice today, it is important for stakeholders (academic staff, postgraduate students, technological support staff, trainers, management) to understand the impact of eLearning, eTeaching, and eEducation. This MSc Applied eLearning Programme is seen as fundamental to moving us all forward so we can make greater use of the opportunities in our teaching provided by the learning technologies available today. Practitioners develop the confidence and skills to develop, facilitate and manage eLearning in different contexts and with different pedagogical approaches. They also have easy access to high quality, flexible learning materials and a technical infrastructure that supports flexibility and diversity. Now into its sixth year of delivery, the programme is continuing to grow in popularity and in 2012, was the International eLearning Association's (IELA) Blended Learning Programme Winner.

Keywords

Academic professional development; Assessment; eLearning; ePortfolios; Pedagogy; Technology

Introduction

Throughout the noughties, there was a sense in the literature that a missing element in the provision of academic professional development (APD) in eLearning was a concern with the design of eLearning events or courses (McConnell, 2006). Several years on, and eLearning can now be considered to be a mainstream delivery component of higher education and indeed the professional development opportunities available for academic staff (Beetham & Sharpe, 2013). Internationally there are established expectations of academic staff to continue to offer more flexible forms of course provision using technology. For the adoption of new relevant technologies in learning and teaching across an institution, professional development strategies need to focus on achieving a critical mass of staff that are competent online teachers and capable of enhancing and sustaining the integration of media and tools into their learning and teaching practices.

Within formal education settings, professional development programmes are still needed which develop knowledge expertise and research skills in using digital technologies to enhance this form of educational provision. Within the Republic of Ireland, effective blended learning is still a relatively new approach for the majority of education and training professionals. In DIT, we identified a clear gap in the market for an MSc Applied eLearning programme to provide innovative pedagogical approaches and technical skills to directly address this gap. The programme curriculum reflects the strong focus on the application of theory to professional practice, as well as rigorous training in educational research methods. We see it as a vehicle for diffusion of academic staff development in new learning technologies. The programme team have long recognised that the range of academic professional development needs is complex and goes well beyond technical skills to include pedagogical and managerial skills and knowledge.

Background and Context

A recent report in the Irish Times (Faller, 8 March 2012) highlights the lack of a standard directive regarding the qualifications of lecturers in higher education in this country. This MSc programme is aimed at providing such a qualification to enable academic staff to work to their full potential in their practice with the support of relevant and innovative learning technologies. While 30% of the Dublin Institute of Technology's full-time academic faculty hold doctorates, and 78% hold masters degree in their subject discipline, there has been a clear need to develop the part that eLearning and blended learning can play. Also we saw a

need for an accredited professional development programme for professionals from the public and private sectors who wished to implement eLearning solutions in their organisations. As a result of market need, this programme focuses on workplace and academic practices in training and education, and enables participants to collaborate and develop learning practices. This is a unique environment where participants from academia and industry collaborate, forming research clusters, alliances and teams, supporting interdisciplinary learning by enabling co-operation with experts from other disciplines.

Since the commencement of this Masters programme in 2007, starting with just 8 participants, numbers enrolling in the programme have grown steadily each year. In 2011 applications for the programme increased to 26 applications, and 2012 saw a further 16 participants join the first year. The blended delivery of the programme is based on the recognition that for the adoption of new learning technologies across any institution or organisation, professional development strategies need to focus on achieving a critical mass of staff that are competent online teachers/trainers and to enhance the institution's capability to sustain the integration of new technologies into professional practices.

To date, this two year part-time programme has had over 35 graduates, with a further 16 currently registered for completion in 2013, and a new intake of 16. As well as academic staff from further and higher education, professionals from the eLearning industry such as trainers in commercial enterprises, policy makers, managers, researchers, librarians, outreach workers, technical developers, learning technology specialists, and educational developers have enrolled in this programme. Participant backgrounds are from diverse disciplines such as accountancy, architecture, biological sciences, childcare education, chemistry, computing, design, engineering, enterprise, hospitality management, language teaching and science. Participants from the public sector include those from the health services (both executives and practitioners) and from the private sector, there have been instructional designers, multimedia developers, accountants, finance and insurance analysts, educational technologists and IT trainers. An important facet to the programme has been the inclusion of lecturers from the Apprentice Education sector, where we have had successful participants drawn from construction, refrigeration, and electrical engineering.

The 2012-13 participants are also from diverse sectors: legal education, mathematics, Hibernia College, An Garda Síochána, FBD Insurance, the CD-VEC, and we have one student completing year 2 of the programme at a distance from his current base in Africa. Feedback from the participants sees this Programme regarded as an ideal upgrade route for the teachers and tutors in higher and further education and trainers wishing to learn how to work with the range of current technology available today and take full advantage of networked eLearning opportunities in their organisation.

Goals of APD in eLearning

In an effort to counteract the popular notion amongst academics new to eLearning that it is a technological solution rather than a pedagogical innovation (Salmon, 2005, p.205), we focused our programme goals very specifically on the pedagogical aspects of eLearning. The primary goal of the programme is to provide participants with a comprehensive grounding in a range of relevant uses of eLearning for knowledge and skills development. All modules aim to incorporate learning opportunities to encourage the participants to develop the technical, pedagogical and cultural skills needed to design, support and evaluate appropriate eLearning opportunities. The applied nature of the programme seeks to emphasise the appropriate use of eLearning approaches in each participant's work and in the work of others in order that they are able to undertake a practitioner-based eLearning initiative within their own working practice.

Recognising the importance of reflective practice for such academic professional development sees the programme give confidence to all participants to critically reflect upon their own professional context and development as practitioners in particular through the stage 2 applied project and research-based evaluation of their developed artefact, application or resource. The paradigms of action research and reflective practice – which often underpin APD – essentially involve both individuals and the institution in a wider community of practice. At one stage of the reflective and reiterative cycle, participants need to review examples of best practice within such communities, and at a later stage are encouraged to feed back to those communities the fruits of their own development activities via conferences, journal articles, and involvement with professional interest groups.

Philosophy Underpinning the Programme Design

The ability to utilise suitable digital tools and media has become the new learning literacy for the 21st century, and teachers are central to the endeavour to enable future generations to maximize their capability in this regard. The role of the online teacher is seen as crucial for effective achievement of learning outcomes and enjoyable virtual and blended learning experiences. However, a competent, confident online teacher is a new and different role for many academic staff. Professional development needs to include facilitating successful group discussions, new class management techniques, developing appropriate assessment strategies and changing administrative processes (Banks *et al.*, 2003). Alongside all this, teachers need an understanding of the dynamics of online communication and interactions, needing to learn effective ways of facilitating and teaching online. Providing skills training and having technical competence is not enough (Phelps & Graham, 2004); instead what is required is a change in attitude, values and beliefs which will develop confidence for ongoing learning. However, it should not be assumed that teachers automatically know how to communicate or behave online (Coghlan, 2001); many do not and require professional development and there is a plenitude of research to suggest that the best way for teachers to learn how to work effectively online is for them to experience the process first-hand, as online students themselves (Kempe, 2001).

As well as supporting teaching, there is a strong emphasis on the programme on the acquisition and extension of skills needed to design, produce, use and evaluate high quality e-learning resources and materials. All modules have a strong research and theoretical underpinning in learning and provide a fully rounded exploration of learning technology. The programme prepares participants by instilling values and principles that are creative, analytical, critical and strategic. It allows participants to take control of their own professional development and empowers them to make connections with their own experience and knowledge. The applied nature of this MSc is significant; it resonates with a widely held view in the literature that academic development for change and innovation needs to be delivered ‘just in time’ and be grounded in specific local contexts. Thus, professional development in eLearning should focus on workplace practices and enable the sharing and pooling of knowledge amongst academic staff; the right balance should be achieved between theoretical understanding of the technology and practical applications, and courses should be designed so that the specific needs of teams of learners in specific contexts such as academia and other professional contexts are addressed. Furthermore, it should

provide these authentic contexts for development of staff alongside opportunities for participants to critically reflect on their learning as they progress through the course (Wilson & Stacey, 2004).

The programme is very much learner-centred and requires the participants to critically reflect on their development in the context of their own teaching practices. They learn early on about the theories and concepts that underpin the development and implementation of their subsequent applied project. They are also provided with the opportunities to develop the pre-requisite skills and tools required to develop and implement their projects. The project itself is practitioner-based requiring the participants to implement and evaluate, through applied research, their developed resource in the context of their own professional practice. Ultimately, participants are encouraged to collaborate, form research clusters, alliances and teams, and supports interdisciplinary learning, by providing the ability to cooperate with experts from other disciplines.

Pastoral Care and Support

Figure 1 highlights the key aspects of support provided on the programme. Participant support is one of the most prominent sources of feedback comments. It is achieved by taking a holistic approach and providing the following services face-to-face and online:

- A week long Programme Induction
- Guidance in the participant handbook and module specifications including essential and recommended reading lists
- Interactive library and study skills packages available via the web
- Educational guidance available from Module Tutors and the Programme Co-ordinators
- IT support from technical staff within the School
- Institute-wide facilities including the Disability Liaison Office, which provides assistance and guidance e.g. Dyslexia, disabled students information
- Contact with peer group via eLearning threaded discussions, wimba live classroom virtual support surgeries, chat room facility, and email
- Exemplar accessible design of an eLearning environment

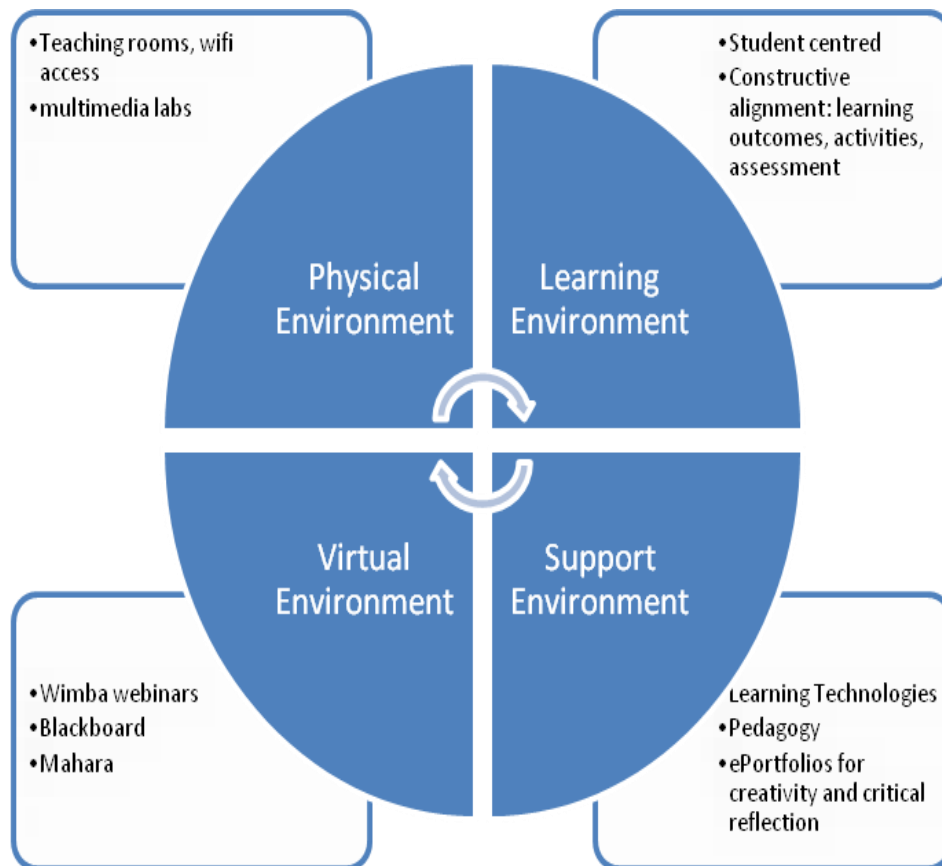


Figure 1: Participant support needs to take a variety of forms

The applied nature of the programme is crucial to its success; the combination of practical skills and theoretical critical insight that participants need to become confident within this fast-moving and richly diverse field is prevalent in all modules. The Applied eLearning project in the second year of the programme combines the participants' knowledge and understanding of theoretical and practical aspects of eLearning, gained in modules taken in Year 1, and gives them the opportunity to develop and research their own ideas and interests and leave the institution with a showpiece of work for potential employers. Assessments use a variety of methods including individual and group work from the following range: wiki development, concept maps, reflective reports, academic papers, small scale practitioner-based group projects, research proposals, presentations, critical literature reviews, and ePortfolio/blog reflections.

APD Programme Structure

This programme takes a minimum of two academic years to complete and requires the participants to complete four Core Modules and one elective Module from the choice illustrated in Figure 2. As learning, teaching and training are profoundly affected by the challenges of the digital age, the MSc Applied eLearning will give professionals working in higher or further education, in training and development, the practical skills and critical insight they need to become confident within this fast-moving and richly diverse field.

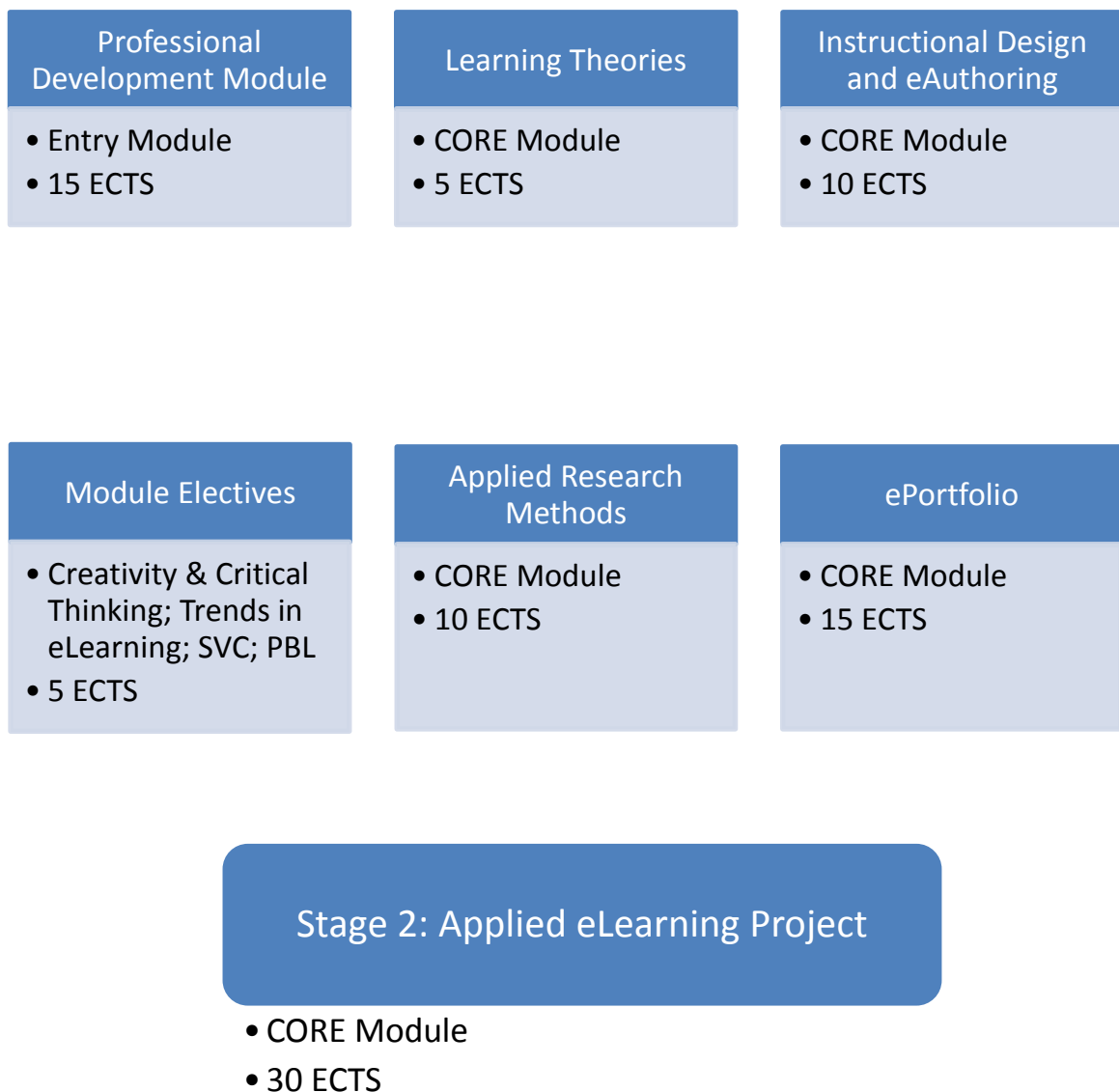


Figure 2: An APD Structure for Applied eLearning

The main strengths of the modules lie in the sound research underpinning all, the substantial applied eLearning project, the ePortfolio, the diverse range of elective modules and the development of skills that will enable the participants to be responsive to the changing emergent technologies in the future. To support the scholarship of eLearning, we have a specialist library which was the first dedicated resource for third level learning, teaching and technology within Irish education and excellent support is provided from librarians who deliver relevant digital literacy seminars and services to participants on all modules.

A unique aspect of the programme is the entry-level Professional Development module, which recognises a participant's previous valuable experience of eLearning from their own context and practice, and takes this into account as part of the entry process to the programme. Therefore employment or other educational experience can now provide evidence of intellectual ability. This also offers the participants the chance to think in advance about the best route through the programme that is fully aligned with their own professional development requirements.

The Applied eLearning project will combine the students' knowledge and understanding of theoretical and practical aspects of eLearning, gained in modules taken and gives them the opportunity to develop and research their own ideas and interests and leave the institution with a showpiece of work for potential employers.

Institutional Perspective of eLearning

Within the DIT, there is now a clear track record of ongoing educational research and the Institute's Strategic Plan calls for "the continuing professional development of staff to meet the challenges imposed by a globalised economy on the educational system". It is foreseen that this programme will continue to grow and its evolution and national and international reputation can be sustained through periods of local and national change including the intended move to the Grangegorman campus and in the face of the varied challenges facing all education systems today.

However, although current participants are highly engaged, to remain competitive in today's educational environment, and open up the programme to a potentially wider market – international and distance learning. Offering a fully online masters which would maintain the central pedagogical and research-focused thrust of the programme, with new online modules

being offered is a possible way forward. With the annual Graduate Student Conference (<http://www.dit.ie/lttc/events/annualgraduatestudentconference/>), and the LTTC journal IJAP (<http://arrow.dit.ie/ijap/>), participants can continue to link in with fellow peers who are researching innovative and creative ideas in Learning, Teaching and eLearning.

ePortfolios for APD

Critical reflective professional practice is a necessary skill for tertiary education practitioners working in the knowledge-intensive enterprises. Integration of an ePortfolio on the programme allows participants to take control of their own professional development and empowers them to make connections with their own experience and knowledge. Over the two years of the programme participants are offered regular workshops where they develop skills for ePortfolio development (Mahara), development of reflective practice, and creating multimedia such as digital video, imagery, and podcasts.

Specific supports were introduced to help the participants gain more from this challenging aspect of their professional development in eLearning.

- The concept of creativity is explored further with them from the beginning of year 1, to enable the participants of the programme to critically think about their learning and how ideas on eLearning integration to practice are developed and refined.
- More supports on reflective writing are provided at various times throughout the programme; supports for reflective practice are incremental in order to enable participants to transform from descriptive narratives toward critical reflections.
- Peer-learning and support between participants are continued and encouraged across the two years of the programme. A community of ePortfolio participants can be fostered where they solve problems and address learning issues together.
- Activities to support participants is provided to engage them in using more multimedia i.e. creation of video, podcasts, images, mind maps to represent their learning within the ePortfolio.

The main changes to the learning and teaching strategies that benefited participants in their work towards the ePortfolio centred on enabling creative practices with the participants in

their learning. Literature on creativity advocates that a psychological space for creativity should exist within the learning environment (Beghetto & Kaufman, 2010); (Fairweather & Crammond, 2010). Therefore we aimed to establish an environment where participants felt psychologically safe, to enable them to grow and develop as learners. Craft's (2012) characteristics of creativity were tried out to underpin and provide a focus to the creative practices that the programme team wished to foster with participants; within these practices, reflective practice was advocated as a means to support all the creative digital media practices of the participants.

Conclusion

This blended MSc programme has quickly evolved to meet the changing needs of the tertiary education and eLearning industry training marketplace within what has been a few very turbulent years in the Irish economy. It is anticipated that the programme will continue a successful trajectory as it offers effective instructional methods, such as comprehensive formative and summative feedback, combining collaboration activities with self-paced study, and personalizing learning paths based on learners' needs. To summarise, the quality of the programme is ensured by:

- Its learner-centred content: the curricula is relevant and specific to learners' needs, roles and responsibilities in professional life. Skills, knowledge and information are consistently provided to this end.
- Granularity: programme content is segmented to facilitate assimilation of new knowledge and to allow flexible scheduling of time for learning.
- Engaging content: Instructional methods and techniques are used creatively to develop an engaging and motivating learning experience.
- Interactivity: Frequent learner interaction is used to sustain attention and promote learning.
- Personalization: The programme is customizable to reflect learners' interests and needs; all module tutors and facilitators are able to follow the learners' progress and performance individually.

The instructional approach used across the programme is summarised in Table 1 below:

Instructional Strategy	Methods Used	Purpose	Delivery Formats
Expositive methods	Presentations, case studies, worked examples, demonstrations	Facilitate knowledge acquisition (mainly conceptual and factual knowledge), orientation, motivation, attitudinal	Simple learning resources (documents and PPT presentations); Interactive eLearning lesson; Video lessons

		change	and podcasts; Webinars (video conference, audio conference, chat-based); Virtual classroom
Application methods	Demonstration-practise method	Develop procedural skills	Virtual classroom (using application sharing)
	Case-based exercises	Develop role-specific cognitive skills	Individual tutored activity; Online group activity
	Role plays	Develop interpersonal skills; Stimulate attitudinal change	Online group activity
	Guided research and Project Work	Active knowledge construction	Discussion forum, e-mail, chat, audio and video conference; Wiki, blog, shared documents
Collaborative methods	Online guided discussion and peer tutoring	Stimulate critical thinking and reflection; Facilitate communications among learners; Develop interpersonal skills; Stimulate attitudinal change	Discussion forum, e-mail, chat, audio and video conference

Sample of References

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