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Virtual Scholarship and Real Academics: A Blended Hyperflexible Technology Approach to Scholarly Practice in a post-pandemic world

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Abstract:

Like many other regional universities in Australia, the authors' university is well equipped to deal with distance and technology (Chugh, Ledger & Shields, 2017), with staff distributed across more than 10 campuses, and many working from home on a regular basis in a non-COVID year. Yet despite this, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 presented challenges, as staff are not immune from the digital divide issues of bandwidth speed and stability, especially as the whole world moves to a video conferenced meeting solution. This presentation will discuss how our university handled this new triple headed challenge of a renewed focus on Scholarship of Learning & Teaching (SoLT) in relation to Australian government advice (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2020), along with a desire for upskilling in TEL, but simultaneously the limitations of technology in the pandemic, with a view to providing guidance for other institutions looking to mount this challenge.

In tackling this issue in 2020, we were fortunate that our university already provided several avenues for staff to engage in and learn about SoLT. Among these, the Scholarship of Tertiary Teaching (SoTT) conference ran over two days via Zoom and offered several virtual concurrent sessions and topics allowing staff to share the results of their systematic evaluations into their teaching practice and student's learning. Each session is recorded and made available via a YouTube channel, providing opportunity for conference participants to watch sessions they were unable to attend and this year we recognised the work of our presenters, abstract reviewers, and session facilitators with digital badges.

Based on this successful model, we realized we had the essential tools already to move our other major training avenue, the Intro to SoLT workshops (previously delivered face-to-face), online. The aim of the workshops is to provide staff with a collegial environment to discuss and develop research ideas. The virtual environment makes this harder to achieve however the SOTT conference showed us that smaller sessions (four hours over four days), along with the use of breakout rooms could provide opportunity for small group discussion and that the value of Zoom Chat as a back channel for discussion was essential and should be encouraged amongst participants to provide an environment where we could maintain consistent support (Soon & Cowling, 2019).

Attendance and feedback showed us that this worked. Over 50 staff attended the event over four days, and feedback was universally positive, and this led us to rethink how our L&T events should be offered. Specifically, the success of the changes suggests the development of a hyperflexible model of delivery, asynchronous but with guided support and local contacts (assisting to build campus networks), and the foundation knowledge of how to complete a systematic evaluation turned into an online module/micro-credential as a prerequisite for face-to-face and virtual workshops. The result being a L&T model that leverages the lessons learnt during the pandemic into a new blended model, bringing the best aspects of face-to-face and online delivery into a new academy of best L&T practice.

References

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