Weaving a Seamless Fabric: using flexibility, innovative pathways, technology and a cluster of industry and academic partnerships to skill the Social and Community Services Industry

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Flexibility of delivery using innovative and entrepreneurial approaches is the primary focus of this paper. It uses the term flexible delivery in its broadest sense to include all aspects of open and distance learning and issues related to life-long learning. It is concerned with flexible ways of delivering training and education and, as a consequence, with more flexible approaches to teaching and learning that teachers and learners need to adopt.

Introduction:
The Department of Community Development at Canberra Institute of Technology has developed broad goals with respect to teaching and learning that include an intention to strive for high quality learning. We believe this can be achieved by providing flexible and accessible learning opportunities through high quality teaching and learning infrastructures, integrated with new technologies and intelligently blended delivery strategies. These are the major elements likely to impact on the quality and reach of the programs we deliver.

The focus of the department has been to develop a quality framework for supporting student learning through the introduction of resourced-based, active learning approaches, transforming both the teachers’ and the students’ roles and responsibilities. We have implemented a strategy that has involved building flexible learning elements into an otherwise traditional approach to the delivery of courses.

It is our belief that flexible learning cannot be confined to a singular aspect of training and education delivery. It is, and must be, considered as an important aspect of a broader philosophy that aims to meet all the needs of all the stakeholders, in particular the very special and diverse needs of the learner. The approach we have used has a holistic framework that demands that training and education delivery take on a more flexible role to provide seamless pathways across and between training providers. However, it is important to state that the flexible delivery program we have implemented is subject to ongoing evaluation and re-development. As a training provider entrusted to educate professionals in a highly sensitive field, it is essential that the Institute’s training is the subject of in-depth evaluations to determine whether the goals of the training program are being met and to identify areas for improvement.
Flexible Delivery Programs

The Department of Community Development defines flexible delivery as flexibility of choice for learners. The choices allow learners movement between courses and institutions together with a range of options regarding mode of delivery and entry and exit points.

In embracing flexible delivery in the Department of Community Development it has been our experience that a well designed and implemented flexible delivery program provides greater opportunity for access to higher education. It also improves learning and training opportunities for our industry, fosters beneficial collaboration with industry, universities and other training providers and makes better use of resources, both ours and those of the community.

Our flexible delivery program endeavours to meet educational and skills training needs on demand. The full benefits of technology have been utilised to provide a broad range of educational support services. However, we have been careful not to become tunnel-visioned 'technocrats' and appoint online delivery as the panacea for the 'world of flexibility'. Online learner support through online classrooms is invaluable, but online is only one element of our approach. The success of any flexible learning strategy or program is largely dependent on students in that learning mode being motivated and being supported and encouraged to the same degree as learners in a face-to-face learning environment.

The decision to develop a flexible delivery approach was stimulated by many factors. These factors include: a recognition of the diversity of current and future student populations; imperatives for career development and the normal cross industry movement which accompanies many working lives. In addition there were elements such as commitment to equity of access; a shift in focus from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching; growth in workplace education; the development of new communication and information technologies and, the rapidly increasing competition among training providers on a local and national scale.

As a result of our approach to flexible delivery we have experienced considerable growth in the number and diversity of our student population. It is expected that this trend will continue as an increasing proportion of students will seek access at places and times that fit their family and work commitments. This pattern of growth will be further affected by the trend for people to go through several career changes in their lives, some of which necessitate retraining.

Teaching and Learning Strategies

Regardless of delivery mode, the important elements our training and education program seeks to address are underpinning theoretical knowledge, skills development and integration, practical skills application in the workplace and valid assessment. The Department of Community Development has developed a range of teaching and learning strategies to address these elements. A Portfolio of Evidence is developed by the students with support and guidance from the tutor to ensure recognition of prior learning and current skills and knowledge.

Classes, workshops, study circles and block workshops are conducted by staff who can contribute discipline expertise and industry experience. These teaching strategies provide opportunity for content input, reflective learning and a sharing of experiences and research.
Workbased projects conducted by the student in their organisation/ workplace with support from the coordinator are also used. These involve a workplace mentor and provide students with the opportunity for relevant practical experience supported by the input from staff and/or facilitators with discipline expertise and relevant industry experience at the workshops and study circles.

Further, we use an online support classroom incorporating online revision exercises and activities, the reflection and sharing of experiences and tasks conducted in the workplace or the community through the online discussion groups. The online classroom is facilitated by staff with discipline expertise and industry experience. E-mail contact is maintained through this medium as well.

To supplement and facilitate any flexible delivery program learners need access to module specific print-based workbooks, tutor support and clear communication channels. The training provider must also develop a good relationship with industry and employers so that there is a high level of industry and community commitment and cooperation and involvement in workbased projects. Time for tutors/teachers to provide adequate support must be foremost with faculty heads and heads of departments. There is a real need for managers to be the ‘champions’ of these initiatives and recognise the changing roles and responsibilities of the teaching staff. They also need to recognise the need for the allocation of time and resources for the coordinator who has the challenging task of developing such an innovative learning community.

Assessment

If assessment is to achieve its functions it is vital that it has validity. Whether it is intended as feedback to students on their progress or as part of the grading process for a final qualification, common standards must be applied. These common standards can however be applied to a broad range of assessment tasks. Flexibility in setting the tasks need not denigrate the quality of the assessment. We use a variety of assessment methods, including the submission of written work, practical activities and exercises completed at workshops, workshop participation, presentations, workplace assessment, and panel presentations. It is imperative that assessment and marking guidelines make explicit to students the criteria against which their work will be assessed. Once the learners have a full understanding of the criteria they are required to meet, then there is some room for negotiating the tasks to demonstrate competence. Discussion centred on workplace roles and responsibilities and project potentials will often provide opportunities for assessment tasks to emerge. These can then be identified and negotiated. This allows for the development of tasks that meet the needs of all.

As stated by Diane Westerhuis [1998] ‘… With technological change new expectations emerge. … Flexible delivery and technological advances become linked to a new understanding of our place in the world, an understanding of the concept of a globalisation process’.

Baldock [1995] referring to the Social and Community Services [SACS] argues that “to assume the possibility of a standardised system, applicable to all industries and workers is, I argue, a modernist proposition, assuming a uniformity that does not exist in reality “ (Baldock 1995:140).

The Department of Community Development has met the challenge to design a flexible delivery program that includes a diversity of underpinning knowledge yet still reflects an effective skills base and maintains valid assessment and quality assurance. This has been done without limiting the benefits of a competency approach to training. It is a system we believe can be applied to any number of community based approaches to training and development. We would agree with
Baldock’s reservations about a standardised system but would argue that the flexibility evident in our model allows for a post-modernist approach that can be applied across a range of industries and learners.

**Partnerships:**

As part of the process of providing seamless pathways for learners, this Department has recently developed a partnership with the University of Western Sydney [UWS] for the delivery of a Workbased Post-graduate Diploma. UWS offers our Diploma students with relevant industry experience, who can meet the entry requirements, direct entry without an under-graduate degree. Similar partnership opportunities are being discussed with other higher education institutions and private training providers. Further, partnership arrangements will provide access through articulation and recognition of prior learning for reciprocal access to our courses. Many of the courses offered under these partnership arrangements are ‘fee-for-service’ opportunities for both partners and allow a greater depth of shared resources.

Such partnership arrangements provide a pathway from entry to post-graduate level and offer opportunities for industry, higher education and other registered training providers to be involved. Partnerships should not be exclusive to industry alone. Partnerships with other higher education institutions and registered training providers should be sought to broaden training opportunities across and between industries.

**Professional Development and Institutional Support**

Against this background discussion the following issues are proposed as critical to the success of flexible delivery.

Training and support must be provided to facilitate a change of culture. The role of teachers does not change, but their modus operandi does. They no longer appear in person in lecture theatres in front of their students, but deliver content and argument in print form or through the facilitation of various forms of workshops. They do not have students visiting their office with enquiries, but deal with these through mail, email, workplace visits or telephone. They do not conduct classes in classrooms, but do so through a variety of information technologies, workshops, study circles and so on.

There needs to be ongoing and careful strategic analysis of opportunities for improvement of learning and expansion of fee-earning programs. There may be opportunities here for the development of partnerships that provide expertise and strategies for this issue to be addressed. Management and teaching staff need to be committed to this essential ongoing process.

It is critical that educational considerations, rather than technological be the driving force in decisions about training delivery. Technology is merely a means to an end which needs to be supported by staff training. For example our Department is currently having staff trained as online classroom instructors to meet the demands of fleximode students in all modules. A significant imperative is the training of staff and students in information literacy and the use of information technology.

The most important stage of the implementation process of any flexible delivery program is the design phase in which the policies and processes that assist in the achievement of goals are
established. It is in this stage, where negotiation takes place with students and workplaces, where consideration is given to conceptual abilities, prior experiences and workplace opportunities for exploring the possibilities for learning.

There needs to be an overall management commitment to allocating staff development time for the demanding design phase of a flexible delivery program. The time needs of staff who wish to convert or develop programs for flexible delivery have to be recognised. The design of curricula and instructional materials for flexible delivery is very time-consuming and many initiatives fail because the discipline specialists, who are the writers of content, are unable to meet deadlines because of high teaching hour commitments. This is particularly damaging when students are waiting for course materials. A serious attempt by any department or faculty to position itself as a flexible delivery provider will require release from other responsibilities for those involved in design and production.

There is a need for a management commitment to supporting discipline specialists with expertise in curriculum and instructional materials design, information technology and information management. Teachers and industry representatives who contribute their discipline expertise must be supported by others with expertise in curriculum and instructional materials design, information technology and information management. These people form a project team and each program for flexible delivery requires such a team. To facilitate effective project management for the essential design phase of the project there is a requirement for an experienced project manager, as the team must be managed by a person who can drive the project to completion.

Conclusion
Although the Department has committed itself to the flexible delivery path, that commitment has been reinforced by contemplating the consequences of not moving deliberately in this direction. On the credit side, it is difficult to believe that there will not always be students who will want to study on-campus, because they prefer face-to-face teaching, like studying in company or enjoy the company of their peers. It is known that social and economic needs are key elements in student choice of educational facilities, and the social ones are difficult to meet at a distance from their peers. On the debit side, there will be many who are now studying on-campus who will prefer to study at home, in the workplace or elsewhere, and will be attracted by equivalent or better programs available by flexible delivery from other training providers. Moreover, it is widely expected that the proportion of the population participating in higher education will continue to grow, and this growth will come largely from those who have no history of involvement with higher education, generally from less advantaged social and economic groups. These represent a large market, as do the large numbers of potential students in Third-World countries, all of whom would benefit from access to high quality, flexibly delivered programs without the costs of travel, accommodation and the like.

Thus, the failure to embrace flexible learning could be a failure to engage many potential students, and thus have our Department miss out on opportunities for substantial and continuing growth. Not embracing the concept of a flexible learning unit that meets the demands for the future does not appear to be an option. Weaving a seamless fabric using flexibility, innovative pathways, technology and a cluster of industry and academic partnerships that provides equity of opportunity across an industry seems to be the most favourable option for training delivery within the realities of economic rationalism.
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Instructional Technology Forum ITFORUM@uga.cc.uga.edu Posted: 30 April, 7p.


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