

## Some ins and outs of the Charles Sturt University online learning environment

*Notes for a presentation to the Distance Learning special interest group of the  
Sakai community online discussion group on Teaching and Learning*

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### **The Vice Chancellor welcomes you to CSU**

Charles Sturt University (CSU) was established in 1989 as a multi-campus institution and has grown into a dynamic and progressive University well-known for its innovative approach to education and applied research.

Our eight Australian campuses ... provide local access to higher education across New South Wales, the Australian Capital Territory and Victoria. We also offer several degrees from our campus in Ontario, Canada. Our capacity for flexible delivery and international reputation for online learning provide access to educational opportunity throughout Australia and the world. As a national University, Charles Sturt attracts more than 11,000 students from across metropolitan NSW and an additional 6,394 from other States and Territories in Australia.

To address our commitment to making a positive contribution to the wider Australian community and to participating in the internationalisation of higher education, Charles Sturt University delivers educational opportunities to more than 4,800 students around the globe, with more than 700 students at Study Centres in Sydney and Melbourne.

Through our network of campuses, and in close association with industry, professions and government, we are committed to maintaining a course and research profile to meet the needs and support the aspirations of our communities, and contribute to the enrichment of inland Australia.

We consider our inland, national and international roles to be integrally linked and mutually reinforcing. We believe that the University's success in attracting national and international students strengthens the programs it is able to offer its inland communities. The University's inland location enables it to make a distinctive national and international contribution in such fields as health sciences, food and water security, environmental sustainability and economic prosperity....

I welcome you to Charles Sturt University and invite you to share in our vision of growing communities through education and research.

Professor Ian Goulter  
Vice-Chancellor and President

Source: <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/vcoffice/>

## Summary

James considers these questions ...

1. How do you ensure quality pedagogical outcomes in the online environment?
2. How do you address equity in your online environment for distance education students?
3. How do you create communities of practice within your online environment?
4. What new applications are contributing to CSU's online learning environment?

Tony considers these questions ...

1. How would you represent the context or drivers of professional development in learning and teaching at CSU?
2. How does the Division of Learning and Teaching Services organise itself to meet the professional development challenge?
3. How is LTS influencing teaching practice at CSU?
4. What challenges are yet to be overcome or worked around?

### **How do you ensure quality pedagogical outcomes in the online environment?**

The CSU OLE is very sensitive to the needs of the student. In this regard, educational designers are trying to move away from text heavy subject guides to more dynamic flexible learning outcomes. This means the concept known as 'Writing for the online environment' whereby academics and instructional designers create an environment that includes a good mix of multimedia; social presence of the lecture and appeals to a variety of learners. Creating a 'social presence' means having the inclusion of pod/vodcast/twitter/forums within the online environment. Because of the large contingent of students who are study by distance a social presence can make student feel more included and less isolated.

### **How do you address equity in your online environment for distance education students?**

Australia suffers from a concept known as the digital divide. The digital divide represents a discrepancy in bandwidth speeds throughout Australia. Bandwidth speeds can be horribly unpredictable from fast to nonexistent. To overcome this educational designers at CSU have decided to create smaller levels of multimedia. By that we mean short files that don't take up too much bandwidth. From a pedagogical point of view by editing podcasts to snippets or 'best of' versions, academics can still produce the lectures online but in a short more equitable versions.

### **How do you create communities of practice within your online environment?**

CSU is currently in the process of creating some different forms of COPs or Communities of Inquiry. Current this is done through the use of Forums, Eportfolios, Wikis and Twitter. The real effect will come when more of these forms of constructivist pedagogy become forms of assessment. Assessment using these forms is limited at CSU but we hope that soon we will be introducing them on a wider scale.

### What new applications are contributing to CSU's online learning environment?

CSU is in process of investigating the implementation of University wide mobile technology. This in essence means adapting a lot of our online environment to be more mobile and incorporate hardware such as iPads, Smart phones and eBook readers. Currently an interim report is being produced that will outline the formative approaches towards a workable deliverable. This might be the creation of a CSU app, the introduction of a student wide iPad roll out or a formative approach to designing for the mobile online learning environment.

### How would you represent the context or drivers of professional development in learning and teaching at CSU?

- External drivers – International geo-political climate, the Australian Government's change agenda and higher education funding model  
Australian higher education is still predominantly funded from the public purse. The Australian Government has a complex funding model for the university sector. University funding is now conditional on universities meeting certain performance outcomes including research and scholarship performance of staff, but now also on achievement of certain targets in student enrolments and successful course completions. For example to maximise their government funding universities need to simultaneously address two challenges: (1) to widen participation in university education from traditionally under-represented groups within the community; and (2) to increase success rates (i.e. reduce non-completions) *while also achieving quality standards of graduates and positive feedback from students about their experience at university.*
- Our internal drivers in learning and teaching flow significantly from the external institutional drivers, and may be inferred from statements about the nature of learning and teaching at CSU. This year the university has made a commitment to develop and implement a quality-assured *CSU Degree* curriculum framework that encompasses eleven 'CSU graduate commitments':

CSU has made a commitment to all CSU undergraduates that, as well as gaining an in-depth understanding of their chosen disciplines and professions, they will have access to:

- a supported transition into the first year of university; and thereafter throughout the undergraduate student experience
- employability and generic skills such as effective communication; analytical skills; critical and reflective judgment; problem-solving; team work; and time-management
- the opportunity for international experiences and to develop an international perspective in their discipline or profession
- an engagement with the responsibilities of global citizenship
- the opportunity to develop cultural competence
- the opportunity to engage meaningfully with the culture, experiences and histories of Indigenous communities
- understandings of financial, social and environmental sustainability
- a firm understanding of ethics
- education based in practice
- engagement in activities that foster web-based proficiency
- threshold disciplinary outcomes (*to be developed*).

Source: <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/curriculumrenewal/index.htm>

- The graduate commitments are part of what I think of as our 'service warranty'. But the warranty is broader than that. Our Learning and Teaching website claims that

The university is committed to achieving excellence in education for the professions and to maintaining national leadership in flexible and distance education. Industry relevant courses and workplace learning support CSU's learning and teaching objectives.

Achieving the university's vision and objectives involves:

- providing an accessible and effective learning environment for all students, regardless of location or mode of study
- strengthening learning and teaching partnerships with the professions and industry
- promoting, recognising and supporting good practice in learning and teaching.

Source: <http://www.csu.edu.au/about/learning-and-teaching>

- There is a strong and broad recognition that professional development of teaching and teaching support staff will play an essential part of the cultural change needed if these ambitious aspirations are to be achieved. Nowhere is this understanding more evident than in what is called 'the CSU Degree Initiative', a project committed to the notion of curriculum renewal – see <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/landt/curriculumrenewal/index.htm>.

### **How does the Division of Learning and Teaching Services organise itself to meet the professional development challenge?**

The Division was formed at the start of 2009, uniting the university's educational design service with its courseware production function. Our key roles are listed on our website: <http://www.csu.edu.au/division/lts/role/>.

The Division is organised into three sections:

- *Educational Design & Media* – mainstream learning resource development and educational services
- *Quality Enhancement & Evaluation Services* – includes teaching development, evaluation and data provision services
- *Strategic Learning & Teaching Innovation* – future-oriented and technology-enabled.

An organisational chart is available here:

<http://www.csu.edu.au/division/lts/docs/division-structure/plan.pdf>.

### **How is LTS influencing teaching practice at CSU?**

2010 was the year the CSU Degree Initiative moved into action phase. Learning and Teaching Services is fundamentally committed to supporting quality learning and teaching across the university, and if we are going to be relevant today *and* permanently we believe the division needs to find new ways of working both at grassroots *and* institution-wide levels.

To be frank, LTS influences teaching practice to a greater or lesser degree depending on the situation and the individuals concerned...

### **LTS-sponsored grassroots services**

- LTS staff are the first to acknowledge that we do not hold a monopoly on effective teaching capability; rather, often, we act as disseminators of ideas and exemplars developed by talented and innovative faculty. But we also have strengths in various areas, in the pedagogical uses of technology for example, and often run workshops and observe teaching sessions in the classroom, at a distance and online, in response to requests, to mention just some of our services. Educational designers were the people who supported faculty in the institution-wide roll-out of Sakai in 2007-8.
- The optimum situation is one where the school-based educational designer is invited to work on a subject or course development project by individuals or groups. Until now educational designers (EDs) have overwhelmingly provided subject (unit) level support but the logic of 'cascading design' from *course* to *subject* to *topic* to *micro-learning experience* is not only unarguable but is being increasingly embraced by course teams and individuals; EDs are preparing themselves to contribute to the move to a course-wide design methodology.
- Cases can still be found where subjects are offered revealing design flaws; sometimes an educational designer's name is displayed in the credits for the learning package where that ED had no input. An institution can have world class quality assurance standards and yet have the occasional squeaky wheel. Some faculty prefer to run their race alone. We do not usually talk about these cases but here I know I am among colleagues.

### **LTS-sponsored institution-wide programs**

The Quality Enhancement and Evaluation Services section is responsible for coordination of LTS-supported services to achieve *continuous quality improvement* in learning and teaching. Our three broad roles are *professional development*, *evaluation of teaching* and *promoting excellence through awards and grants*.

### **Moving towards limitless flexibility in supporting quality learning and teaching**

As the CSU Degree Initiative picks up momentum some of us are becoming increasingly conscious of where the pedagogical power needs to reside and where the *course quality* buck should stop. The course teaching team is the institution's A team when aligning course outcome statements to the needs of the profession. The team is also chiefly responsible for design and delivery of the curriculum. It seems to us that the division's energies should therefore primarily support the course team's capacity to understand and crystallise and implement the curriculum *what* and *how*; see Figure 1 (refer to the Powerpoint slide show).

This figure has the form of a crude storyboard that tries to give a sense of the flux we are experiencing. We're looking here at stage 1, the *not-so-long-ago*. Consider this splodge as a placeholder for CSU academic staff.

Now we draw a line to distinguish between new staff in a given year and the rest, whom we can call experienced staff.

Professional development in learning and teaching for new staff had these broad characteristics:

- Uncoordinated grassroots activity
- Centralised induction supporting mainly on-campus staff
- Patchy school-based support for sessional / casual staff
- Focus: develop individual capability

Professional development for experienced staff had these features:

- Uncoordinated grassroots activity

- Patchy school-based support for sessional / casual staff
- Focus: either individual or group capability

When we move to stage 2, which we hope is in the *not-too-distant future*, we may conceive an alternative view of LTS self-adaptation for optimal fit in the changing institutional environment. The Division of Learning and Teaching Services is a broad church in that its educational design staff are scrambling, like everyone else, to make sense of all the agendas battling for ascendancy in the process of institutional curriculum change. We each make sense of the challenge according to our own private educational values and philosophy and biases and skill sets; and yet somehow, through our discussions and machinations, we need to find a common voice.

### **What challenges are yet to be overcome or worked around?**

I will respond to this question by trying to see beyond or through the organisational structures, taking encouragement from the fluid relationships and projects that constitute the CSU Degree Initiative.

- Some LTS staff are making a significant contribution to the CSU Degree Initiative in various capacities. We are variously involved in some of the advisory groups created to champion themes covered in the 11 CSU graduate commitments. Those involved are struck by the fluidity of the landscape ... or should I say river?
- Finding consensus on an adequate framework for staff capacity building for curriculum renewal presently remains beyond our reach. A group of EDs ran a professional development program on course design for the ED team and next year it will probably be offered to course teams. But we have not agreed on a model for forming and empowering course teams, whether EDs and the Quality Enhancement section should have a role in course team building. In a sense the answer will emerge as faculties determine how their course directors and course teams should operate.
- The Quality Enhancement section is trying hard to win support from faculties and schools for the notion of partnerships for course team development, in which LTS and individual course teams action learn their way together towards meeting their team goals. Here is another case where the challenge is one of cultural change.
- LTS staff are involved in ongoing evaluation, implementation and institutional mainstreaming of new technologies, e.g. significant support for Sakai 3 development, in-house evaluation of mobile learning applications and other projects. In this area we think our divisional structure will allow us to continue to provide this service to the university in the foreseeable future.
- Evolving grassroots services. Our 20-odd educational designers face a major challenge. As a general rule EDs have established good working relationships with faculty in the schools they work in. But now the pressure to play some kind of course curriculum consultancy role, even as they struggle to keep up to date with proliferating educational technologies, means that the division is having to ask whether some of our previous design or other support services might have to be withdrawn to allow a new mode of operation to blossom.

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### **Other resources**

Video clips on many aspects of CSU - <http://www.csu.edu.au/csu-live>