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Preparing faculty for eTeaching
Leading horses to water?

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In February this year, Deakin University launched Deakin Studies Online (DSO), its institution-wide learning management system (LMS) powered by WebCT Vista. Previously academics had a variety of applications available to them (and still do until DSO is fully implemented by late 2004) to support teaching and learning. These include TopClass, FirstClass, WebCT 3.6 and various custom-built systems and web pages.

Deakin University has been supporting distance education students in particular with online technologies since before the dawn of LMS's. Despite this there is still a relatively large proportion of faculty who do not use online tools to support their teaching and, even worse, are not particularly computer literate. Further, no-one had used Vista previously, not surprisingly as it was only released mid-2002. The training requirements to prepare staff to develop courses in DSO are varied and, at the moment, just in time.

The University made a decision that no faculty member would have access to DSO to develop courses unless they had received some basic training in the new system (I've nicknamed this process "DSO certification"). It has also developed a Code of Good Online Practice, which defines roles and responsibilities for staff and students in the online environment. Learning Services (our teaching and learning support unit) are active in promoting the development of accessible web pages and informing academics about copyright legislation. Both accessibility and copyright compliance are addressed as part of DSO certification.

Learning Services (LS) have developed a series of workshops to enable staff to become DSO certified. The three 1-day hands-on sessions guide faculty through the complexities of WebCT Vista, starting with the student view, moving on to managing an online unit, designing an online unit and building it. These sessions cover basic functionality within the system only and do not include the many interesting things that can be achieved with Vista, such as using learning modules, quizzes and other online assessments, and so on. But even so, the sessions proved to be a challenge for the majority of staff.

At the University level, staff that had been using TopClass to support eLearning had to migrate their units into DSO for semester 1, 2003 (by mid February, 2003) as TopClass was decommissioned at the end of 2002. Within the Faculty of Science and Technology that affected two members of staff. Learning Services supported them to migrate their units to the new system.

Within the School of Information Technology (SIT), there were about 12 members of staff who were keen to use DSO to support...
their online teaching (including me – I'm also a senior lecturer in the School and teach online). It seemed sensible to encourage them as we have been using WebCT 3.6 for many years in the School and so had a head start with understanding WebCT Vista – or so we thought! The training for SIT staff consisted of a one-day workshop, which amalgamated the content of the series of three that LS run, the assumption being that being highly computer literate and familiar with WebCT 3.6 would be sufficient to allow such intensive training. Also, as eLearning Manager for the Faculty I had been heavily involved in the evaluation and implementation of DSO as well as being the DSO administrator for the Faculty, hence am quite familiar with the architecture of WebCT Vista. So SIT staff have the benefit of in-house expertise to support them.

So how successful has the training been? If the measure of success is whether staff have achieved their goals in migrating to DSO, then results are mixed. The academics who received LS support to migrate from TopClass are now sufficiently confident to run their units without much further support. Of the SIT staff, 6 staff are running units in DSO this semester; at least 2 decided to stay with WebCT 3.6 just 2-weeks before the start of semester, the others were targeting units in second semester for migration. Of the 6 staff in DSO, just three are experimenting with advanced features of WebCT Vista. Interestingly, two of these have extensive experience of online teaching systems other than WebCT, in particular the online conferencing system, FirstClass. One academic, not in the SIT and without LS support (other than 3 days of training), attempted to develop a unit in DSO. His experience has not been good. He is struggling to come to terms with DSO, duplicating the unit delivery in the original unit website.

If the measure of success is whether staff are enthusiastic about extending their use of DSO, then the outcomes are good. All DSO users in the Faculty are talking about being more adventurous with units in future semesters. Hopefully this enthusiasm will infect academics in the Faculty who are hesitant about taking up the challenge of online teaching using DSO. But one aspect that I emphasise to all is that in order to justify the cost (in terms of time and effort particularly) of moving teaching activity online it must value add to the learning experience in some way. Duplicating face-to-face activity is simply a waste of resources.

With the benefit of hindsight – what would I have done differently? The main thing would have been to encourage the early adopters to prepare units for delivery in DSO in second semester rather than first. This would have allowed considerably more time for training and experimentation as well as avoiding being at the bleeding edge rather than the leading edge of new technology adoption. And if I had funds available, I would have organised LS support for every unit being developed in DSO, not just the ones moving from TopClass. Otherwise I wouldn't change much except to have lower expectations of potential success and allowing more resources to support staff during the initial stages of developing units in DSO. Also, staff were keen to see exemplars of what can be achieved using DSO, which didn't exist for the first round of implementations. Fortunately, as more staff are adopting DSO, staff development resources are being produced which include examples of online activities in DSO.

Is it possible to lead horses to water? Yes, but it may be difficult to encourage them to do any more than taste it!

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Jo Coldwell has accepted the LTSS' invitation to speak at their VLE Conference on 14 July – see details on back page