Raising the tide

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The UTSOnline Renovation Project in FASS

**A rising tide lifts all boats**

The title of this blog is a reference to the well known aphorism ‘a rising tide lifts all boats.’ Although it is usually deployed in an economic sense, it more generally means that some outcomes have a benefit for everybody. In the case of the UTSOnline Renovation Project, we used it to describe the fact that while we might not be able to transform every UTSOnline site across the faculty, we would be able to hopefully improve the efficacy and student experience of using UTSOnline by uplifting a significant number of sites. In effect, we would be the rising tide; the boats would be the subject sites.

**The scene**

The Teaching Technologies, Innovation and Support Unit (TTISU) in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) is tasked with providing academic support in three key areas; Programs and Curriculum, Work Integrated Learning, and Teaching and Learning Technologies.

As part of this work, TTISU have and continue to provide support in the various aspects related to Learning Management Systems (LMS). The aim of which is to ensure that not only are staff supported and empowered in the delivery of their subjects, but also supporting the methods by which students can receive a valuable and consistent experience.

**The realisation**

Over time, it became apparent to the team that running workshops and fielding requests were demonstrating a reasonably common pattern; the number of academic staff registering and attending such events were low, and that it was commonly attended by the same academic staff who were typically more engaged with university activities and more experienced with technology.

It was becoming clear that we weren’t necessarily reaching those who could benefit from the support the most.

**The new way**

With the above in mind, TTISU developed the UTSOnline Renovation Project. This project would aim to employ new strategies in providing support to academic staff, and how best to engage those who aren’t typically engaged. The aspiration being to work with individual academic staff on all 285 subject sites that exist for FASS.

The following methods were employed;

1. A proactive engagement approach with academic staff
   1. Rather than wait for an academic staff member to ask for help, reach out to academic staff one by one and ask what we can help with
2. A data driven priority model and ‘plan of attack’
   1. Using data analytics and algorithms, define who might need to be contacted first in order to get the maximum benefit of the project time and budget constraints
3. A research informed and sector benchmark set of standards for comparison
   1. In close collaboration with the schools and academic staff, and with analysis of research available, agree on what a minimum standard of subject site design, navigation and base resources would look like
4. Casual academic staff employed as Learning and Teaching Adjuncts to enact and provide the support
   1. Providing a ‘familiar face’ for academic staff, a common understanding of challenges, a good knowledge of subject site pain points and university policies and procedures. As well as developmental opportunities for the LTA staff by being a part of the project
5. An opportunity for broad upskill of academic staff
   1. By engaging with academics on their time and in their location, and by working with the academic in person or via distance, academic staff could gain new understanding of how to use their subject sites for the best outcomes of students
6. A flexible approach to subject site development
   1. An opt-in approach. Allowing academic staff to agree to small work to be done, or large work. As well as a flexible method in which the work is to be done – face to face and working with the academic, or fully divorced from the process and the LTA completes work offsite. Only agreed upon work would be done

**The Results**

*Develop a set of standards for subject sites within FASS*

In collaboration with the schools, a FASS Threshold Standards for Online Learning Environments document was developed. This document sets out - in a simple checkbox table on one A4 landscape page - what would be expected of a FASS subject site at UTS.

*Define a support priority list of all subject sites within FASS*

Using a combination of reports, analytics and algorithms, a collated list of all subject sites for FASS was produced that incorporated;

* All 285 subject sites and their respective owners
* ‘Click data’ LMS analytics which was used as an ‘activity barometer’ or ‘heat map’ of possible activity within sites
* An algorithm which compared activity with enrollment numbers, therefore providing the ability to prioritise on ‘low engagement, high enrollment’ sites – conceptually helping more students earlier

*Learning and Teaching Adjuncts Employed*

A total of three LTA staff were contracted over the course of the project, all of whom were casual academic staff.

*FASS subject sites benchmarked against Threshold Standards*

With only a few exceptions, all FASS subject sites were benchmarked against the Threshold Standards both before any work was carried out, and after. Giving the faculty a large data set for before/after comparison and other future data analysis

*Significant faculty uplift in subject site visual design, navigation, and resources*

With the work being opt-in, flexible and collaborative, results were mixed across sites. However, most had a conversion to the standard faculty template, a consistency of left hand navigation, and base resources and information such as staff contact details, teaching resources, and assessment grouping

*Professional development uplift for academic staff*

Working individually with academic staff gave additional value in guiding staff through not only the methods and thinking around why the standards have been developed and what benefits are realized by staff and students, but also sharing the knowledge of how to implement these themselves into their subject sites. Additionally, there was professional development uplift for the LTA staff as they worked on the project and formed trusted relationships with staff across schools

**The future**

*Moving from a bookshelf to a classroom*

So what have we learnt through this process that may influence our future? While the UTSOnline Renovation Project focused on the basics, and therefore raising the tide, one of the key findings that will continue to inform the development of FASS learning management system environments beyond this project is revealed to be the need for elements of interactivity to be built in and designed in the process.

We’ve conceptualised this idea as moving from a bookshelf model of LMS, to a classroom model. In this idealised example, a physical bookshelf is a place where resources are stored. You can place books and DVDs and other materials on a bookshelf, which may or may not be accessed. In terms of thinking about an LMS, a ‘bookshelf-LMS’ is an online collection of resources in much the same way. Subject coordinators can upload material - readings, links to websites, but the learning, if it takes place at all, is purely transactional, and often not at the forefront of the coordinator’s mind. Rather, material is filed - and often in large amounts - which can be accessed as required.

Alternatively, a classroom model of an LMS would be one that allows for a far greater degree of interactivity. While there are bookshelves in a classroom, the learning takes place through the process of engaging in carefully designed and structured activities based upon the material. It is the interactivity that is crucial, and that feature should be central to the development of student learning. Fortunately, there are a great many different ways to structure interactivity within an LMS. We’re not sure that these approaches will ever (and neither should they) replace elements of face to face learning, but rather we consider them to be valuable supplements to the blended learning model.

*Relational approaches to learning - even in an LMS.*

What this really means is that the LMS needs to be more than a sterile environment populated by material that is as likely to be ignored as it is accessed - if the material can even be found. Instead, if they are to be effectively used by students and academics (and we mean effectively to be much more than students being able to find out when an assignment is due; i.e. we mean that they are an aid to learning) then it is necessary that there is both space and structure that encourages relational aspects and behaviours to develop. It is easy to limit this discussion to the relationships between students and academics, or between the students themselves, but that misses the crucial relationships between the academic and the university hierarchy, and the academic and other staff (such as learning designers and tutors). These relationships develop when there are opportunities for engagement with academic concepts and ideas, and crucially, the opportunity to share thoughts and discuss them.

The classroom approach to subject design, as described above, places the idea of relationships in the centre of a student’s learning journey, rather than hoping that it is a byproduct of a particular LMS or template to be adopted. Decisions about learning processes need to be made with what’s best, easiest and most efficient for students and for the academics. These decisions need to be reflected in the design of the LMS.

**Closing**

Raising this tide has been a valuable asset for the faculty, and by definition the university and its students. However, it is clear there is far more opportunity to be seized upon, and that the journey is just beginning. This beginning - The UTSOnline Renovation Project - has set our sails confidently in the right direction.