Chapter XII
Blended Learning and the New Pressures on the Academy:
Individual, Political and Policy Driven Motivators for Adoption

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the factors relating to adopting blended learning by teaching academics and the associated social world around technology adoption in a large Australian university. Set up as an institutional case study, the findings are interpreted through two theoretical frameworks: diffusion of innovation theory and actor-network theory to reveal the complexities of innovation adoption. The chapter examines teaching academics' individual motivations including the institution's political and policy drivers, and shows how technology is shaped to fit a context, and how the context in turn shapes the use of technology. The closing discussion considers new work systems and processes that facilitate and accommodate change precipitated by technology adoption, and suggests how the transformation process might be supported.

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of blended learning approaches has increased dramatically over the past two decades as universities, especially in the developed world, have adopted learning management systems. Staff have 'recognised the opportunities for using e-learning and teaching on its own are far fewer than where e-learning is integrated into other approaches as a form of blended learning' (Littlejohn & Pegler, 2007, p.1). Using case study research data as evidence, this chapter explores the multifaceted complexities that teaching academics encountered in a large multi campus university as they adopted blended learning that was supported by a learning management system. It discusses

the challenges and opportunities teaching staff experienced as they navigated through the adoption process. It also exposes the readiness of the institution to embrace and accommodate change and describes the social world that surrounds that adoption. The chapter closes with a discussion on how higher education institutions could remain current and responsive to innovative approaches to learning and teaching. The 'innovation adoption' described in the rest of this chapter includes the adoption of the learning management system as a technology as well as adoption of the blended learning and teaching approach it enabled.

BACKGROUND

This case study was conducted at Monash University which is considered to be Australia's largest university. It has nearly 3500 teaching staff and more than 58000 students (Monash University, 2008) taking courses from ten faculties across six Australia-based and two overseas campuses. As information technology adoption and use are integrated in the University's strategic plan, the University has made significant investments at institutional level in technology infrastructure, staff and student support services and institutional development to facilitate e-learning. Adopting WebCT Vista™ (now known as Blackboard Vista™), a commercially developed learning management system (LMS) allowed the University's strategic plan to integrate its educational and technological opportunities into its courses. This was a specific initiative of the University's technology policy. Prior to this, Monash University employed multimedia, print resources, face-to-face workshops and residential sessions in its blended learning and teaching approaches. In recent years with the adoption of the LMS, the blended learning opportunities have extended to e-learning environments.

Whitworth (2005, p. 685) aptly pointed out that integrating blended learning in the cultural and technological environment of a modern university 'must be recognised as a process with political implications' where tensions are high, time for evaluation and reflection is limited and financial investment in technology is huge'. The adoption and integration of blended learning at Monash University was no different. The institution has its own unique culture, politics, values, goals and its own perspective on innovation, change and technology adoption. The political landscape of any organisation is unique to that organization and its influence on innovation adoption, promotion or failure is therefore equally unique.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This study draws on two theoretical frameworks, Rogers' classical diffusion of innovation theory (Rogers, 2003) and actor-network theory to interpret the findings. Rogers listed five characteristics that influence the uptake of an innovation and listed them as:

- **Relative advantage:** Which is viewed in terms of time, costs, effectiveness, convenience, quality, results or social prestige, over what the innovation replaces.
- **Compatibility:** Which refers to alignment with existing values, practices, needs, past experiences and social norms.
- **Complexity:** Which refers to perceptions regarding the innovation which is seen as being difficult to understand, learn and use.
- **Trialability:** Which relates to the possibility to trial, experiment and reduce uncertainty and to learn by doing prior to adopting.
- **Observability:** Which refers to the visibility of the results of adoption which stimulate discussion, interest and uptake.

These influencing factors in Rogers' theory of diffusion of innovation are used in the current

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