



Evaluating Online Professional Development at the University of Canterbury:

A Report on the T4T4T Pilot Project

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Introduction

This report analyzes the T4T4T Pilot Project through the lens of the 'information ecology' approach, emphasizing data collected about the University of Canterbury. It begins with a brief background statement on the author's participation in the pilot project. It then discusses the information ecology concept as an organizing framework for the data, provides a sample analysis of a subset of the data, and concludes with recommendations geared specifically to online professional development in a [New Zealand] university context. The report concludes that while the T4T4T concept could flourish as a professional development tool in the tertiary sector, effective use of it in a university context will require additional research and experimentation. In particular, we need more empirical work on the way in which a university 'ecology' differs from that of colleges and polytechnics with respect to the faculty incentive structure for engaging in activities related to teaching practice. Developing new tools for evaluating the success of online communities would also enhance the confidence with which an online professional development forum could be rolled-out across the tertiary sector.¹

Background

In late 2003, the University of Canterbury's Teaching and Learning Centre (UCTL) sent an email to academic staff requesting participation in an upcoming pilot project on Web-based professional development in the tertiary setting. I originally registered my interest in being a participant, but subsequently accepted an invitation to become a researcher/mentor for the duration of the project. A political scientist, I have an ongoing research interest in online technologies

and their impact on the research university (see Fletcher 2003).² I focus on the adaptive (or maladaptive) relationship between organizations, technology and public policy; consequently, throughout the T4T4T process, I was most interested in how the T4T4T concept fit within both the organizational context and the public policy context (e.g. PBRF) of a New Zealand university (Canterbury).³

Research Framework

Nardi and O'Day (1999) define an information ecology as "a system of people, practices, values and technologies in a particular local environment."⁴ Examples of information ecologies analyzed in their book include a hospital, a library, and a public school. Throughout their research, the authors are interested primarily in how the introduction of a new information technology produces perturbations in these ecologies, in a manner analogous to the way in which natural events can affect a biological ecology.

What they find is that some organizations adapt well to innovation, producing positive changes in organizational relationships, productivity, customer service, or other key variables. Other organizations, however, adapt badly, or not at all, to innovation, either finding the new technology a threat to existing norms and practices, or assuming that the innovation has no practical link to their job requirements. Dysfunctional ecologies can collapse further into employee burnout, ennui, and cynicism, as well as reduced performance vis-à-vis competing organizations in their industrial sector. In all cases, the interaction of people and technology within specific professional/information ecologies shapes the path of adaptation, which is a corollary of the insight that technology is never neutral in its effects.

¹See, for instance, Preece, Abras and Maloney-Kritchmar (2004). 'Designing and Evaluating Online Communities: Research Speaks to Emerging Practice', *International Journal of Web-Based Communities* 1(1): 2-18.

²Fletcher, Amy L. (2003). 'Distant States in World Markets: New Zealand Universities Confront the Information Age', *Journal of Asia-Pacific Affairs*, 4(2): 1-20.

³I found participation in the pilot project to be quite productive, both in terms of the empirical research on online communities and in terms of the opportunity to engage with the other mentors/participants.

⁴Nardi, Bonnie A. and Vicki L. O'Day (1999). *Information Ecologies: Using Technology with Heart*. Cambridge, MA: The M.I.T. Press, p 49.

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Working from the Nardi and O'Day 'information ecology' concept, I organised my T4T4T research around several framing questions: 1) how - or will - T4T4T affect the Canterbury information ecology?; 2) will there be sources of resistance to T4T4T, and if so, what motivates this resistance?; 3) does online professional development provide a better (i.e., more accessible, more efficient, more effective) source of information for university teachers than the current sources?⁵ As compared to CPIT and CCE, in particular, I assumed that the Canterbury information ecology is distinguished by:

1) an orientation among most faculty that puts primary emphasis on one's disciplinary identity—hence, teaching practice must be understood as operating, first, within those disciplinary boundaries;

2) a focus on substantive research and publication within these disciplines;

3) a larger and more de-centralized campus, which tends to produce much less interaction across departments than characterizes smaller institutions;

4) a primary high-level administrative focus (during much of the timeframe of the pilot) on the initial PBRF round and its comparative results.

The data suggest that several of the Canterbury participants benefited from their participation in T4T4T, and that the concept of online professional development is worth testing further. However, the declining level of interaction and participation as the trial progressed also indicates that the T4T4T concept needs to be re-tooled in order to provide a better fit with the University.

Analysis

Sample Discourse Analysis⁶

The following sample discourse analysis of a complete discussion within the T4T4T pilot project indicates that, with a suitable number of committed participants, online professional development could generate very positive outcomes for teaching practice. The example revolves around the theme 'Requiring re-certification in tertiary contexts.' It took place from 19 May 2004 – 2 June 2004, and included ten T4T4T members. All four of the CTA institutions were represented by at least one member. Seven of the participants were mentor/researchers, while the three other members came from the University of Canterbury. The discussion generated twenty-one messages:

TABLE 1: Summary of Re-Certification Discussion

| | Date | Total Messages | Total Participants | Mentors | Non-Mentors | Canterbury Participants | Outcome |
|------------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------------|---------|-------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
| Re-certification | 19 May – 2 June | 21 | 10 | 7 | 3 | 6 | Peer-Review Draft Proposal |

The launch question for this discussion (submitted by a Canterbury mentor) was, should some form of 're-certification' [of teaching competence] be required in the tertiary sector? Discourse analysis of the discussion that followed shows that this contextual/policy question generated rich and robust interaction. For instance, M2, from CPIT, argued 'they [tertiary lecturers] often forget that they are employed as 'teachers of . . .' (at least for part of their job if not all!)'. M3 (CCE) asked 'what checks are there ever that person X employed as a lecturer can teach,' and noted in a later message that 'it has always surprised me that NOTHING is required when lecturers at tertiary level start as a teacher. Not even attendance at some sort of serious orientation event.'⁷

⁵ For research purposes, I define the University of Canterbury as an information ecology, with a specific professional/teaching culture for which T4T4T represents a new variable/challenge. However, it would be possible—and productive—to analyze departmental information ecologies, and how differences at this level could also impact the success of implementing T4T4T.

⁶ The author is working on a longer paper on the T4T4T pilot project that will expand the discourse analysis to include several discussions. A copy of any publication based on the T4T4T pilot will be made available to Ultralab and the Ministry of Education.

⁷ To protect anonymity, each mentor is assigned a label from M1 to Mi. Similarly, participants are labelled from P1 to Pi. These labels are not assigned alphabetically.



Importantly, responses to this question regarding professional development in teaching - the key goal of T4T4T - suggest a relatively high level of agreement across the four institutions that some form of 're-certification' [understood to mean ongoing demonstration of teaching competence] is desirable. P2 did express concern that *"'certifying' usually provides some bureaucratic loops for people to jump through and can even create the reverse of what you wanted. The incentives become to jump through the hoops and the objective is lost. . . let's structure the incentives so that staff do these things because they want to."* P3 noted *"I am emphatically in favour of it [professional development]. . . BUT it will never happen unless resources are available for it."* M6 (Canterbury) picked up on the theme of resources, arguing *"there have been some good examples of peer reviewing at U/C (e.g. in the geography dept) but they have been grass roots initiatives with no resourcing and no infrastructural support"* [emphasis original]. Two concerns raised were the unreliability of student evaluations as a gauge of good teaching (Canterbury mentor), and the need to recognise that an increasing emphasis on professional development of teaching would inevitably decrease the time given by academics to their research and administrative roles (P1). At the conclusion of the discussion, several mentors and participants decided to work together to submit to the forum (successfully) a draft proposal for peer-review of teaching at Canterbury.

In conclusion, this dialogue - while preliminary - suggests one potential area of consensus across the Canterbury Tertiary Alliance: though differing on the degree to which incentives for formal professional development in teaching should be voluntary ('carrot') or mandated ('stick'), all participants acknowledged that the current incentive structure works against faculty choosing to spend time on improving their teaching when faced with competing demands such as research/publication, administrative tasks, and grant applications. One can infer that a format such as T4T4T could be an ideal method for formalizing professional development in teaching, provided that the macro-level and policy-context recognizes the need to adjust the incentive structure towards an increased emphasis on the teaching aspect of the academic's professional role. The peer review draft proposal that emerged from this discussion

also suggests that, with a 'critical mass' of active participants, using T4T4T can produce tangible outputs in addition to the more diffuse (i.e. difficult to measure) gains represented in the dialogues.

Potential Challenges Identified in the T4T4T Pilot

Despite the explicit incentive of approximately \$1500 in professional development funds - and the implicit incentive of taking part in an innovative opportunity to improve teaching practice - uptake among Canterbury academic staff was modest at the outset, and active participation (measured by postings and responses, and not simply by the number of logins) declined markedly over the course of the project. Four Canterbury mentors (three at the end of the project, due to one mentor resigning from the pilot) tried a variety of methods to encourage participation, such as heavy facilitation (working intensively with one participant), brown-bag seminars to address questions and concerns about the project, face-to-face interviews, and phone calls. A specific section of the website was also set up to encourage discussions directly related to teaching - and the context for teaching - at Canterbury, but there was very little interaction in this space throughout the project. The overall level of participation thus fell far short of an optimal commitment to an online learning community - that is, one that could be self-sustaining, rather than relying on constant input and questions from the mentors.

From an information ecology standpoint, the interesting question is 'why'? Why did the T4T4T pilot project fail to spark at the University of Canterbury on an ongoing basis? Much of the answer lies in the interaction between technology (T4T4T), people, and culture in the information ecology that constitutes Canterbury University, as mediated by the T4T4T mentors/researchers throughout the implementation of the pilot.

First, the consensus-driven decision-making process in the pilot tended to mean that the Canterbury mentors were at a disadvantage in pressing for overt consideration of several variables that were impeding the implementation of T4T4T at Canterbury. For example, one Canterbury mentor suggested, with support from

the other Canterbury mentors, that a 're-launch' of the pilot in the second semester would provide needed additional publicity for the project and perhaps encourage new members. However, a majority of the T4T4T research group rejected this proposal, mainly on the grounds that it would interfere with the 'action research' insights to be gained by an uninterrupted pilot project. However, action research is, by definition, 'emergent'. As Dick (2000) states, *"the process takes place gradually. Its cyclic nature helps responsiveness. It also aids rigor. The early cycles are used to help decide how to conduct the later cycles"*.⁸ Thus, it is not clear why 're-launching' the project would have been a methodological problem within a research approach that is iterative. The suggestion that the re-launch could take place only within the Canterbury group was also rejected. Emergent hypotheses that could have been tested (in a second cycle of the pilot), in an effort to improve the use of T4T4T among Canterbury academics, therefore remain to be explored.

Seel (2000) argues that *"organizational culture is the emergent result of the continuing negotiations about values, meanings, and proprieties between members of that organization and with its environment. If you want to change a culture, you have to change all these conversations"*.⁹ Yet in the T4T4T case, an implicit assumption that there exists a similar professional orientation (to teaching) across the four institutions of the Canterbury Tertiary Alliance may have impeded consideration of the hypothesis that Canterbury's professional ecology poses a more significant challenge to the implementation of T4T4T than do those of the Christchurch College of Education, CPIT, and perhaps Lincoln University. For instance, a Canterbury mentor asked as early as March, in an email to other Canterbury mentors, *"is it possible, for instance, that the nature of some of the postings from professional teachers are a turn-off to Canterbury academics?"*¹⁰ Another Canterbury mentor concluded (mid-project) *"I think we have to do our very best (and I think we are doing this) to make T4 work. But I also*

think we have to consider the possibility that the model may be flawed. At the moment I get the feeling that we are in the position of having to make it work, no matter what . . ." Over time, then, a perception emerged among part of the research group that *certain conversations could not be had within the T4T4T pilot*.¹¹ Consequently, the possibility of 'changing conversations' at Canterbury, and perhaps adapting its teaching culture to an appreciation of the possibilities of online professional development, did not occur as readily as it might have, had a more flexible approach to action research and 'negative' input been adopted at the outset.

A more diverse mixture of participant/mentor disciplinary backgrounds could also have improved the pilot project outcomes at Canterbury. The dominance of participants and researcher/mentors from the fields of education and educational technology often made it difficult to bring dissenting views into the monthly mentor meetings. Several mentors from both Lincoln and Canterbury expressed frustration with the lack of 'fit' between T4T4T, as it was developing, and their institutions. As noted, these concerns did not translate into major iterations of the pilot that did not fit within the preconceived notion that improvements in teaching required either a) extensive immersion in the theories and practice of Education (as a discipline); or b) fine-tuning of the web-page layout. Yet precisely because university academics place great value on their disciplinary/departmental identities, it was difficult to find a critical mass within any major (discipline) sufficient to generate productive discussions about teaching. For example, an award-winning teacher from Canterbury who subsequently withdrew from the pilot, noted several times that while s/he appreciated the T4T4T concept, s/he also wanted to discuss teaching primarily with other academics in a specific professional field. The more general discussions of teaching theory did not seem useful enough to this participant to justify the time spent on the website.

⁸ Dick, B. (2000). A Beginner's Guide to Action Research.

⁹ Seel, R (2000). 'Culture and Complexity: New Insights on Organisational Change', Culture & Complexity, Organisations and People 7(2), p. 2.

¹⁰ This query was in reference to several discussions early in the pilot that, while useful to some and often humorous, included meditations on cat litter-box training (as a metaphor for one approach to teaching), children in school, sports and tramping. The T4T4T team, to be fair, had decided to launch the project with an online opportunity for the participants' to introduce themselves and their interests, in an effort to build a sense of community within the virtual environment. In hindsight, it might have been more productive—from the Canterbury standpoint—to begin with a substantive question about teaching, rather than focusing on the interpersonal aspects.

¹¹ I stress 'perception', because—as in all collaborative research projects—it is highly likely that each person 'framed' T4T4T, and the research group discussions, in very different ways. There is no 'right' or 'wrong' framing; rather, the issue of how and why researchers felt able—or not—to influence the direction of the pilot became an important variable.



Conclusion

The evidence indicates that T4T4T - as currently designed and implemented - is not an optimal fit with the existing information ecology at Canterbury, though a preliminary discourse analysis suggests that there is potential for the concept to 'spark' if the incentive structure is adapted. Specifically, if the purpose of T4T4T is to encourage ongoing professional development in the teaching practice of university lecturers, then two inter-related changes are necessary:

- 1) additional research needs to be conducted in order to determine what factors and material would draw more university lecturers to the site;
- and 2) incentives - at both the organizational and macro-level - need to be developed that encourage lecturers to spend additional time on improving their teaching.

