

Recommendations for a Borderless University of British Columbia

Assignment 2, Option 2

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This report is developed in response to UBC's decision to expand its *Place and Promise* strategic plan to incorporate a vision of the University without Boundaries. It takes as axiomatic that any changes to e-learning at UBC must be grounded in the current Strategic Plans for UBC (overall), and for IT at UBC, and pay heed to the history of the management of e-learning at UBC. It will outline UBC's current Strategic Plan, *Place and Promise*, as it relates to the use of learning technologies. It then offers five key recommendations that will help UBC expand *Place and Promise* to realize the vision of a university without boundaries:

- expanding the online learning technology courses offered by the Center for Teaching and Learning Technology (CTLT);
- developing a faculty and staff Community of Practice on the myUBC portal to foster engagement and the sharing of best practices;
- expanding online undergraduate courses to include more core and high-demand courses;
- breaking down the boundaries between UBC's two main campuses through e-learning;
- expanding the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund to encourage innovation in teaching and learning with technologies.

One of the aims of this proposal is to increase efficiency by avoiding redundancy. All educators within the institution should benefit from the pedagogical experiments and discoveries of others (Strong, 2007; UBC, 2000; CTLT, 2012) and “be introduced to the benefits of learner-centered pedagogical designs that are best supported by various technologies” (Land, as cited in Haughey, 2007, p. 31). These may be found in previous funded projects or those developed by faculty members.

Background

Enhancing student learning is a cornerstone of UBC's Strategic Plan. The Plan foregrounds the following actions to attain this goal: providing students with a small class experience, improving flexibility and self-directed learning, and revising curricula and teaching practices to ensure that they reflect current best practices in pedagogy. Although E-learning is not specifically mentioned in the current Plan, learning technologies will be fundamental to enable UBC to realize its vision of a University without Boundaries. Three of our recommended changes - expanding CTLT's online support; the Community of Practice; and the expansion of online undergraduate offerings - specifically use learning technologies to help to realize the actions highlighted in *Place and Promise*.

Place and Promise also prioritizes furthering UBC's areas of excellence and becoming a world leader in knowledge sharing and mobilization. The authors note that UBC has long been recognized as a centre of excellence in e-learning practices (Bates & Sangrà, 2011). This proposal to envision UBC as a university without boundaries will enhance its role as a world leader in the development and use of learning technologies.

Action (<i>Place and Promise</i>)	Recommended Strategy
Small class experience; flexible learning	expand online offerings to include core and high-demand courses
Support best practices in current pedagogy	develop online learning technology workshops and support (CTLT)

Action (<i>Place and Promise</i>)	Recommended Strategy
Knowledge sharing and mobilization	Community of Practice on myUBC; Online learning technology workshops and support (CTLT); Breaking down boundaries between UBC-V and UBC-O
Further UBC's areas of excellence	Breaking down boundaries between UBC-V and UBC-O; Expand TLEF funds to foster innovation in learning technologies

Table One outlines how the recommended strategies correspond to actions proposed in *Place and Promise*.

The last ten years of e-learning management at UBC have been marked by divisions concerning whether e-learning services and planning would best be provided through a centralized agency or through de-centralized, faculty-based services. Former Associate VP-Academic Neil Guppy noted in 2002 that UBC is an “amazingly decentralized” university (Macfadyen, 2004, p. 21) - referring to the near autonomy its 12 faculties have in organizing their teaching and research activities. UBC's deep decentralization only intensified in 2005 when then-Okanagan University College became UBC's Okanagan Campus (UBC-O). Although part of UBC, UBC-O has a separate Senate and operates fairly autonomously from UBC's Vancouver campus. Our proposed changes respect UBC's decentralized culture and continues UBC's tradition of “little” e-learning systems focused on small units (faculties or departments) (Visiting Team Report, 2003, p. 3).

The Vision Process spearheaded by ACCULT (Academic Committee for the Creative Use of Learning Technologies) between 2000 and 2002 represents a “little,” decentralized, approach to e-learning visioning. Through faculty-specific ‘town hall’ meetings and focus

groups, the ACCULT committee used a qualitative, ground-up approach to outline faculty-specific visions of what e-learning could look like in five years. The visions are specific to each faculty's needs and cultures, and are remarkably diverse. However, ACCULT did not present an overarching e-learning vision for the university as a whole.

Meanwhile, much of UBC's e-learning development was being produced through the centralized Distance Education and Technology (DE&T) unit. A 2003 external review of DE&T suggested that the kinds of faculty-based "little" distance education strategies represented by the ACCULT process were more appropriate for UBC than a centralized unit (Visiting Team Report, 2003, p. 3) - although it was critical of ACCULT's .

While the University accepted the recommendation of the external committee to decentralize learning technology support to the faculties (9), it suddenly reversed this decision in April 2005. DE&T would no longer be dissolved, but instead amalgamated into the Office of Learning Technologies (OLT). After another re-structuring in 2010, the Centre for Teaching and Learning Technology (CTLT) became the primary UBC unit providing learning technology services, although each faculty has a separate IT office that provides some services and assistance.

Despite these 'boutique' units, faculty and staff continue to have difficulty accessing the e-learning expertise and services that they need to effectively integrate learning technologies in their courses. CTLT's e-learning workshops, restricted to between 25 and 35 faculty members at a time, are insufficient to provide adequate instruction in learning technologies to over 3600 UBC faculty.

This history of learning technology management informs our proposed changes to UBC's e-learning strategy; specifically, we avoid making recommendations to change the administrative

structure of learning technologies at UBC because it has been so overhauled over the last ten years. We aim to make changes within the existing structure to enhance faculty and staff access to learning technology expertise.

Recommendations:

1) CTLT Online Training in Learning Technologies

It is paradoxical that CTLT's programs on how to use learning technologies are almost entirely offered in-person. The difficulties of providing learning technology training on the scale that UBC needs points to two major boundaries: (1) the boundary between faculty and CTLT that makes it difficult to access training and (2) the boundary between on- and off-line learning and training.

In May 2012, UBC will begin a two-year process of changing its learning management system (LMS) from Vista to Blackboard Learn 9.1 (BLearn). In order to ensure a smooth transition, faculty and staff will need to be trained in how to use the new LMS. Ideally, they will also be able to access knowledge about BLearn's unique affordances that differentiate it from Vista, and how they can make the most of these affordances to advance student learning.

The first major change we propose is motivated by the upcoming transition to BLearn. It is to develop and provide online tutorials and webinars, accessible 24/7, to faculty and staff on how to effectively use this new LMS platform. We propose that CTLT gradually develop and offer online learning options for all of its current workshops on learning technology software. This will enable faculty and staff to access this knowledge when they need or want it, and greatly enhances its accessibility beyond the limited number of workshop participants that CTLT can currently accommodate.

The current (January-May 2012) pilot implementation of BLearn in 40 UBC courses will help CTLT determine exactly what kinds of training and support UBC Faculty and Staff will need. CTLT staff will need to compare this set of needs with the training programs and support that Blackboard provides for this product. It is possible that CTLT will need to build additional online training to supplement Blackboard's existing support materials.

Implementation will also require CTLT to devote significant staff hours to design and develop training materials and webinars in other learning technologies. CTLT has begun to pursue this for students with the "Orientation to Learning Online" course available to all students who use Vista. In developing the faculty and staff specific materials, CTLT could evaluate the effectiveness of this Orientation course, and decide whether this system of delivery as an LMS course would be most effective for the faculty and staff learning technology training materials. One advantage of locating this training within the LMS is that it centralizes these materials and enhances their accessibility.

2) MyUBC Portal for Community of Practice and Engagement

UBC is a widely recognized leader in the development and use of instructional technologies (Bates & Sangrà, 2011) and in its Trek 2010 strategic plan (2004) reconfirms "its support for innovations and improvements in teaching through the application of leading-edge technology" (Haughey, 2007, p. 27). Much of the innovation at UBC has been top-down, stemming from its strategic planning. However, Newton (2003) states, "both top-down and bottom-up initiatives are required for sustained changes" (Haughey, 2007, p. 30). For this reason,

our second proposed change is the creation of a community of practice and engagement within the myUBC portal.

According to Bates (2000), the best strategies for e-learning innovations are not always those that are planned, because the planning process has inherent limitations. Innovative ideas can emerge from individuals, enthusiastic lone rangers or creative groups of educators (Bates & Sangrà, 2011) who have developed unique ways of using e-learning technologies. As per Taylor (1998), ““lone rangers” are those individuals who institutions have traditionally relied upon to take up and pioneer new ways of teaching based on new technologies” (Wilson, 2007, p. 124).

A community of practice (CoP) within the MyUBC portal will not only engage its members towards the use of e-learning but will also bring them together as a community (Anderson, 2008). This network or database will be available to all UBC’s faculty members in a central location that they frequently access. It will be a place where faculty can share best practices, and learn about previous e-learning projects funded through the TLEF (see recommendation 5).

Because UBC is so deeply decentralized, there is little communication among faculty across the university regarding different contexts in which learning technologies are used, and their learning value for students. The development of a faculty CoP in the myUBC portal advances one of the commitments made in the UBC IT Strategic Plan (2011) in conjunction with the university’s vision: increased engagement with the community, staff, and faculty members to pinpoint their needs and deliver “effective technology solutions” (p. 8). We want to locate the CoP within the myUBC portal because most faculty and staff already access it on a near daily basis, enhancing ease of use for the CoP.

The CoP will also benefit UBC learning technology administrators, who can use it to identify how UBC learning technologies are being used - and to gauge the effectiveness of their use. They can pursue research into some of the more innovative uses of the technology (Bates & Sangrà, 2011, p. 82), and evaluate them vis-à-vis established benchmarks for best practices such as "scalability", "quality and innovation in teaching with technology", "sustainability" and "cost-effectiveness" (Macfadyen, 2004, p. 21). The CoP should help learning technology administrators develop a clearer vision of what additional learning technology support and tools are required to develop and support "technology-based teaching" (Macfadyen, 2004, p. 20) that fits the unique faculty-based cultures of the University.

In addition, if UBC is prepared to recognize the value of good teaching as a professional activity equal to research, it should evolve the success of e-learning. Indeed, a clear definition of what best practices are in a 21st century context (Bates & Sangrà, 2011) should first be developed and agreed upon by members in the CoP.

Finally, while sharing their best practices in the myUBC portal, we envision that faculty members will identify their goals and relate them to the institution's vision. Hence, UBC's administrators could use the portal to identify innovation and excellence in teaching. It could lead them to re-think how the organizational culture operates in the institution (Bates & Sangrà, 2011) and evaluate the possibility of improvement.

3) Online Courses for Increased Learning Access

Some of the goals for improving the learning experience of students as described in UBC's strategic plan (2011) are to give first-year students a small class experience, and to improve flexibility and self-directed learning. Creating online sections for first year

undergraduate courses would help to achieve these goals, and have a number of benefits for part-time and non-traditional learners.

Changing the delivery mode for first-year courses would be a cost effective approach to delivering quality content to address the learning needs of a large number of students, as per the CTLT course development guidelines (2012). While the adaptation of courses from face-to-face delivery into online delivery can range from a few hundred dollars to several thousand (Bates & Sangrà, 2011), high-enrolment classes would, from a purely economic perspective, produce more return from this up-front investment.

Second, a reduction in the number of students enrolled in face-to-face sections of first-year classes would allow for a more desirable faculty to student ratio in face-to-face courses. This is not the same as suggesting that online courses require less work or fewer instructors, as in fact the opposite has been shown to be true (Maddux, 2004; Njenga & Fourie, 2010). Rather, having an online option in lower level courses would make it possible for students to choose whether they wanted to take a course face-to-face or online.

Finally, course materials for first year courses - typically broad surveys of a subject area - often remain the same over time, thus requiring less year-on-year maintenance and updating of course content. However, the reasons for adopting an online approach to delivering first-year courses at UBC are grounded in more than economic and feasibility issues; online course delivery has been suggested here first and foremost because it is an effective companion to face-to-face instruction in an increasingly wired, collaborative, and small, world.

One common goal of universities with clear visions for technology implementation is to use fewer financial resources to meet the needs of their students, while maintaining the same quality of instruction (Bates & Sangrà, 2011). Currently however, undergraduate students in

fully online courses at UBC are typically enrolled in only one or two upper-level courses in order to finish off a degree begun face-to-face on the UBC campus (Bates & Sangrà, 2011). Expanding the course offerings to include first year courses would meet the needs of students at UBC as well as being consistent with criteria outlined in both the DE&T Project Development Handbook (2000, p.18) and the CTLT course development criteria (2011), although this change may kindle some resistance from the organizational culture of the University.

Organizational culture in post-secondary institutions can present boundaries to change, and result in preemptive dismissal of even very good ideas when they challenge the existing approach to education, take time away from research goals, require additional teaching training for tenured professors, or are suspected to interfere with faculty autonomy (Bates & Sangrà, 2011).

Maddux (2004) explains that many students prefer face-to-face courses over online delivery because of the social element involved, causing some faculty and administrators to voice concern that an increase in online delivery of courses may cause a reduction in quality of the 'university experience' for students. It should bring some comfort to consider, however, that just as printed books failed to eliminate teachers from the classroom, and online publication has taken its place alongside the printed book rather than burying it in the ground, so too will online courses, at any level, settle into a partnership role with traditional classroom learning (Njenga & Fourie, 2010) and allow for maximum flexibility for learners.

4) Taking down boundaries between the two main campuses

Place and Promise: The UBC Plan aims at creating an exceptional learning environment to foster both student learning and research excellence (2012). To enhance these aims, tearing down the borders between the two main campuses and building a more integrated and collaborative university is necessary.

UBC is composed of two major campuses: Vancouver and Okanagan. While both campuses display the UBC sign at their entrances, they function as independent entities. At present, these two campuses are divided, not only by distance, but also by engagement and collaboration. A long time UBC employee in this group attested that there is a very distinct “us” and “them” attitude between the two student and faculty bodies. They are organizationally structured differently, with different faculties and even different academic Senates. The barriers between the two “UBC” campuses are so dense that the majority of the same degree programs offered by both campuses are composed of entirely different courses.

In order to follow suit with UBC’s strategic plan and eliminate the physical and cultural borders that currently exist between UBC-V and UBC-O, more integration and collaboration efforts on the part of faculty and students are needed. Because the two campuses are separated by a significant physical distance, e-learning initiatives would act as an adhesive through which students from both campuses could collaborate in a learning and research capacity and faculty could be introduced and begin to collaborate on new learning and research initiatives.

Because the design, delivery and attendance required in e-learning is flexible in that faculty from both campuses can collaborate and create an online course that serves students from both campuses, e-learning is a cost-effective and logistically feasible tool that can be utilized to break down the current barriers that exist between the two campuses. To start, CTLT could offer networking and collaboration workshops aimed at bringing faculty together from both campuses

to help foster the relationships that faculty members would need to build with one another so that they can create online classes to service all UBC students. Once a set of online courses has been developed and offered, this would help to create an online community between both campuses and would likely spark student collaboration in learning and research. Additionally, because each campus answers to a different administrative body and is supported by different information technology departments, these collaborations would also help take down some of the administrative barriers within the university, compelling different administrative departments to work with one another.

By breaking down these barriers, each UBC campus is able to tap into a virtually new pool of resources to collaborate with and therefore further UBC's prestige in both research and student learning. Expanding resources, collaborations and integrating UBC into one university through e-learning, will enhance student learning and foster new faculty research collaborations.

5) Funding: The Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund

Bates and Sangrà (2011) explain, "the plan that is not connected directly to the budget process could become a disjointed effort with minimal success and no long-term gains" (p. 92). For this reason, and because UBC is such a large and diverse institution, this report recommends that project-based funding be expanded to support e-learning within the institution.

The Teaching and Learning Enhancement Fund (TLEF) at UBC was "created in 1991 to enrich student learning by supporting innovative and effective educational enhancements" (TLEF website, 2012). Included in the essential elements for approval is that the proposal be "consistent with TLEF mandate and *UBC Place and Promise* Goals" (TLEF website, 2012). As

Bates and Sangrà (2011) explain, “if senior administration wishes to support more strongly the use of technology and innovative teaching processes, this should be linked to the budget process” (p.99). Therefore, this report identifies the TLEF as a critical component to breaking down the borders that inhibit UBC from achieving the goals set out in the strategic plan. Expansion of the TLEF is critical to providing funding for qualified projects, and therefore, the Plan’s overall success.

Conclusions

The recommendations described above have been designed to identify and remove existing boundaries to provision of a quality learning experience for UBC students, and contribute to the evolution of a rewarding and effective work environment and community for UBC faculty. They have been crafted with particular attention to the vision and values of UBC as a beacon of outstanding educational and research practices in Canada and across the globe. Increasing flexibility and access for students and faculty, improving communication among UBC campuses and faculties, and the enhancement of efficient resource allocation practices are vital to achieving UBC’s goals of drawing in exceptional students and faculty, and furthering its ongoing journey towards becoming a truly borderless university.

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