Breaking new ground: implementing a cross-centre combined assessment task

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Abstract
This paper documents the experience of staff in a College of Education as they developed and implemented a cross-centre assessment task. Themes arising from the experience are identified and implications for similar collaborative efforts discussed.

Introduction
In mid 2001 the Dean of Pre-Service Teacher Education in a New Zealand College of Education held a series of “Think Tank” meetings with the ten Heads of Centre (HOC’s) to evaluate the Bachelor of Education (Teaching) degree. A major area of concern expressed in these meetings was the way in which assessment seemed to be driving the shape and delivery of the modules that made up the degree. Allied to this was a belief that students were being over-assessed and as a result were overstressed.

At the third meeting of the series (22/09/01) the then Head of Centre for Technology Education pointed out that one of the assessment tasks for the first year compulsory Information and Communication Technology (ICT) module was focussed on research and a related seminar presentation. As it was not content specific he suggested that it might provide a basis for a joint assessment task with another centre.

The Head of Centre for Professional Inquiry and Practice who had a similar content specific seminar in their compulsory first year Professional Inquiry (PI) module saw a potential match-up and began discussions with her Technology counterpart to explore a possible joint assessment task.

Initially it seemed that current timetabling and resource demands within ACE would prevent any linkage occurring. At that time the whole first year cohort undertook the PI module in semester one, whereas the ICT module was spread over two semesters. For the link to work students would need to take the ICT & PI modules concurrently. Limitations of the educational technology resources available in the college made it impractical to deliver the entire ICT module in one semester. However the cohort all completed their first education module in semester two, and this presented an opportunity for the idea to progress.

A series of meetings between the HOC’s of Technology, PIP and Education resulted in a new structure for the first year modules being developed which allowed this concurrent delivery to be achieved.

During the first six week’s when the concept was being developed discussions had only been taking place at Head of Centre level. Now that the feasibility had been established, lecturers in both centres were briefed and agreement in principle was reached with them to pursue the proposal further. The task of exploring the logistics and nature of the link was undertaken by the relevant module coordinators in the two centres, and in the beginning of December 2001, the decision to proceed was made.

The way in which the change was introduced fits within the power-coercive strategy (McGee, 1997, p261) and there was a likelihood that the lecturers would see the link with PI as a top-down imposition and thus adapt to the change rather than embracing it. It was possible that lecturers might react to the fear of the unknown as their comfort zones were threatened. In such an event
they would hear what they wanted to hear and focus on the perceived negative outcomes (Robins, 1993).

A further possible barrier to the success of the trial was posed by the limited communication from the HOC’s in the initial stages and the lack of widespread involvement by the lectures affected during the decision-making process. However the lecturers in the Centre for Technology Education had shown an openness to new ideas and a preparedness to take risks in a prior collaborative venture with a local primary school (Lee, 2001).

Rogers (1983) has proposed a five-step model of innovation. The two steps in the initiation phase (agenda setting, matching) have been outlined in the introduction and the paper focuses on the implementation phase (refining and restructuring the innovation and the organization, clarifying the innovation, routinizing or institutionalizing the change as an integral part of the on-going activities of the organization) (Rogers 1983, as cited in Householder and Boser, 2000, p5). Change is a highly individual experience that affects people in different ways. As Fullen (1991) states “educational change depends on what teachers do and think – it’s as simple and complex as that” (p.117). In this case these lecturers may well have been expected to initially develop negative attitudes to the new link as they faced up to the confusion, uncertainty and challenge of the new relationship (Butler, 1996)

The Nature of the Relationship

A common assessment task was written which required the students in groups to investigate an educational issue related to the Treaty of Waitangi, and to give a 20-25 minute multi-media presentation on it to the rest of the class. To ensure consistency of the messages given to the students the assessment task was introduced at a mass lecture by the module coordinators of both the Centres. Class time to work on the research and production of the presentation was given in both the PI and ICT modules, and the group presentations were jointly observed and marked by both lecturers.

Method

This was a qualitative case study undertaken by a member of the Centre for Technology who had previously taught the module, but who was not involved in the trial. He had however played a key part in the initial conception of the link in his role as Head of Centre, Technology Education. By taking a constructivist approach the researcher sought to understand the contextualised meaning of the data.

An initial data source were the minutes of the various meetings that took place in the four-month period that the relationship was being explored and formalised. The author also kept a personal journal of the process which provided another source. The potential bias of this journal is recognised and it was only used to flesh out matters not clear in the minutes.

Data was also collected by means of two audio-taped interviews with the five lecturers teaching the module. The interviews took place in the week after the presentations in semester one (June 2002) and semester two (November 2002). The tapes were fully transcribed and given to the lecturers for them to amend or add to if they so desired. It was considered important to situate the study within the wider interpretivist framework with its focus on the goal of uncovering the participants understanding of the events described to allow exploration of the understandings and actions of the people involved in the project. A different researcher might well emphasise different aspects of this very complex setting. In order to reduce the possibility of presenting a particularly researcher-
biased interpretation of the events the participants were also given a copy of the draft paper and their feedback was used to produce the final paper.

The research attempted to answer four questions:

?? What were the lecturers perceptions as to how and why the link eventuated?
?? What were their initials attitudes to the link with Professional Inquiry?
?? What were their relationships with the Professional Inquiry lecturers?
?? How did their attitudes develop as the year progressed?

Findings

Although both staff agreed to trial the joint assignment for 2002, there was considerable opposition to it on the part of two of the ICT lecturing staff, and they began the relationship holding quite strong reservations about the trial. This paper focuses on the experience of the ICT staff during that first year.

Perceptions of original link

The ICT lecturers had not been involved in the initial Head of Centre/Programme level discussions during which the idea originated and the decision in principle to create the link was made. The programme coordinator worked with his counterpart in PI in the development of the firm proposal and writing the common assessment task and marking criteria. For the other four ICT lecturers their first involvement really was when the final proposal was given to them to discuss and agree to. The five ICT lecturers had quite different perceptions as to driving force and purpose of the link. There was some debate going on in the College at the time as to nature of ICT exit standards for graduating students and the best means for the college to provide these within the pre-service teacher education degree. The current placement of ICT modules within the Centre having responsibility for the Technology curriculum modules was being considered as part of that process.

One lecturer saw this as the key motivating factor and viewed it a something that was forced on the group;

“How I perceived it was that the place and position of ICT was to use a word which is probably not totally correct but sort of under review or under threat and that has proven to be the case and that maybe for our long-term survival as a course we needed to reach out and establish links across . . .”

Omega

Two lecturers saw it as emerging out of a general concern about the heavy assessment load being carried by the students. They felt no concerns about the process itself.

“As I understand it, it started off as an idea that came up in your head of centre’s meetings where there was the perception in leadership level, programme leadership level that there was some efficiencies to be gained somewhere in student workload with assignments. . . . I was happy with the information I was getting because I wasn’t expecting to have a picture perfect sort of thing.”

Theta

“my perception was that an initiative came from on high . . thinking that it would useful to link the ICT with PI as an experiment and also with the objective I think of making links to ICT from another curriculum area and also to experiment with the idea of reducing the load on students”

Gamma
The Centre for Professional Practice and Inquiry was perceived as being the driving force in the process by another lecturer. She had not been involved in any of the preliminary discussions on the proposal and this had led her to seeing the link as a threat.

“I think it was seen as a start for ICT to become cross-curricula or to be used in every curriculum area and from memory PI approached ICT. No consultation, not for me . . . and I guess that I was a little bit concerned in that I saw it as a threat initially”

Alpha

The sense of powerlessness in the process and the feeling that a fait accompli detrimental to the ICT module was being foisted on the Centre for Technology was particularly strong for one lecturer. A philosophical and personality clash between ICT lecturers was also playing a part in colouring perceptions about the process and the motivation for it.

“A lot of the things, before we got to that meeting and after that initial meeting, had actually been decided in between that you had no control over. A certain person had also created, had gone in without everybody’s consultation and made decisions almost for us all which was a little bit upsetting or annoying and highlighted that some ways there’s not a lot of cohesion or, that’s not the right word, as lecturers in this paper sometimes. So when we got to that meeting a lot of things had been decided and PI had printed their book and things couldn’t be changed”

Beta

This clash between the perceived College leadership’s view of the inevitability of the process and the ICT lecturers belief that it was all up for negotiation and agreement was highlighted by another lecturer.

“I think, the leadership group was moving ahead of the Omega and Beta concern group in the sense that they thought it was all a fait accompli and I think it would have been very, very difficult to have turned any of that round but there was still probably the belief on Beta’s part, if not Omega’s that if we said no, the whole thing would turn around”

Theta

Initial reactions

Most of the lecturers were very positive about the new relationship when it began in February 2002. Opportunities were seen for personal and professional growth and benefits for the students were also identified.

“I saw it as quite an interesting opportunity for us for a variety of reasons. These aren’t necessarily in order but it opened up a new avenue of growth for me. It certainly I saw the strengths in providing students with an opportunity to do quality rather than quantity I saw it as an opportunity for us to work with other people who had specialized knowledge in other. I saw it as an opportunity maybe to actually get more time for the course. I also saw it as something different and I enjoy I guess something different”

Omega

“My attitude was very positive because it was hard for me to see how we could fight that sort of change and, it was something that I’d probably been hoping to see happen.”

Theta

“I was quite excited by the idea. I thought it would be very useful because I think that I’d been concerned that the ICT module didn’t really lead anywhere and I thought that the only way to actually make an impact was to work with other centres”
Gamma

However, two of the lecturers went into the partnership with quite strong misgivings as to the impact of the relationship on the integrity of the ICT module.

“We did talk about it prior to it happening and I think I voiced by misgivings at that point. My doubts about it or my concerns about the paper... and I did voice similar concerns when we went to the PI meeting with Omega. There was a weighting issue and things at that point. I think I felt that we were losing a lot of the paper to PI’s topic and that so I was very concerned about that, that we were losing time in terms of pedagogy I suppose of ICT teaching and learning. I expressed that concern at the beginning and I probably still have concerns about that.”

Beta

“Initially I think I saw it as a bit of a threat where in my head I knew that perhaps ICT should be in every learning area instead of a subject in its own right and intellectually I’d done essays on that but personally from my own job point of view I guess I thought, oh well here’s the beginning of the end”

Alpha

Interestingly, one of the lecturers had concerns that perhaps reflect the differences of opinion and approach that emerged during the initial development of the link. He felt that working with PI may have served to highlight some fundamental weaknesses within the ICT module itself.

"I was a bit hesitant I guess because I wondered whether our procedures and ways of working would stand up to the scrutiny of people from outside particularly PI. My experience of them is that they are exceedingly well organised pedagogically. I think they actually have an idea about where they’re going and why they’re doing it and a very coherent idea too and work well together as a team.”

Gamma

Links with PI lecturers

Although the common assessment task and marking criteria had been established the actual mechanics of the link had not been addressed in any depth. There was thus a lack of clarity as to the amount of class time each subject area would devote to the assessment task, and the roles of the respective lecturers with regard to topic selection, responsibility for content, research support and skill development and the marking process for the presentation. In the first semester there were a number of different relationships experienced by the ICT lecturers as they worked with their counterparts in PI. Some of these differences were due to the number of classes taken by individual ICT lecturers. Omega, Gamma, and Beta only worked with one PI lecturer, Theta and Alpha worked with three. The other factor which played a part was the degree to which the ICT and PI lecturers shared a common pedagogy and approach to assessment.

For most lecturers the relationship was seen as a very positive experience.

“Well firstly it was a highly satisfying arrangement. I think Epsilon was of a similar temperament to me . . . .She actually made that point to me how similar we were in outlook... You sort of established roles. It was actually a breeze really.”

Omega

“I guess in some ways it was easier from the teaching point of view. I was at times a little unsure about what . . . was expected of us...but it seemed
to fall into place reasonably well when I contacted the PI lecturer who was new anyway so in a way we both learnt a little bit about it together.”

Gamma

“I didn’t actually meet my PI counterparts initially, I knew one of them but I didn’t meet the other two until they came to the actual presentation. I got on well with all three of them, there wasn’t a problem there at all. It was actually good working with them I found.”

Alpha

PI, we had a good strong relationship and understood and knew where we were coming from. Zues was somebody I hadn’t worked with before, I think we had lots of moments... So working with the people was very much a lot of growth in ways that were way beyond what people were sort of expecting.”

 Theta

For one lecturer however, the relationship was much less satisfying.

“I didn’t really have that much linkage with the PI lecturer. . . . I would have to say looking back that there hasn’t been much consultation between the PI lecturer and myself. As to who’s fault that is I don’t know, its partly mine I think.”

Beta

There were concerns expressed about the way in which the choice of topics were organized,

“. . . the PI lecturer had actually put up some topics and they chose them from that and so somehow that happened and then I sort of had to do a lot of teasing out of the topics to make them reasonable.”

Beta

“I guess I would have liked to perhaps been more involved in that process of setting things up initially and if I’d known what I know now then I would have been more proactive in sort of suggesting that a bigger role for myself with the PI class”

Gamma

The joint marking and moderation process was also seen as problematic by some lecturers.

“. . . but I felt it was a wee bit quick making the assessments The PI person was always the one who got up and said now this is how we’re going to do your presentation and then your lecturer and I will go out of the room and we will assess you. . . . I was really thrown the first day because I didn’t realise we were going to give the marks straight away. . . . I felt with the first group their marks were too high after the discussion, . . . I would have preferred to see them all before allocating grades.

Alpha

“There are some sticky issues relative to moderation and all sorts of other things”

Theta
Feelings at the end of semester one

After the first implementation of the joint assessment task those staff who had been enthusiastic about the link with PI remained very positive about the experience. They identified an increase in the quality of work produced by the students.

I have noticed a greater depth of understanding and application, especially from the class which I had this year. . . . the idea that they had two people to turn to I think has actually encouraged them to debate more, to think more and to receive a broader range of input than they probably would have if they were just left up to me to do. . . . it was a great adventure there’s been a lot of innovative and creative thinking . . . so yeah I’m really thrilled with the outcome.”

Omega

“So far I’m talking positive in terms of the vision of what we’re trying to achieve and largely positive in terms of the outcomes.”

Theta

I think that the quality of presentation was probably better marginally perhaps or perhaps significantly in some cases. . . . I still feel very positive about it. I think it’s a model for the way that we should proceed in the future and I think its good for us to have the contact with other people because I think it perhaps helps us to get what we do into perspective better and I think that we can only improve it as we improve the process and our understanding of what’s required to make it work”.

Gamma

Alpha, who had quite strong reservations about the project when it was first developed was much more positive about the link after her first experience implementing the new assessment task.

“I would like to see it continue. I don’t think I would want to go back. I think the input from both is quite valuable. I would actually like to see it go further afield. I’m quite positive about it. I think there were little things to sort out but they’re really just organisational, structural things and fairness things that I am a bit perturbed about.”

Alpha

Beta, who had been the strongest critic of the new link still had deep felt concerns after the first semester.

I still have real concerns. . . . managing it and making contact with the lecturer is something that I need to address. . . . I also think having done it now I will be more proactive in making sure the ICT emphasis is addressed . . . I still really have concerns about that. . . . the integrity of our role needs to be maintained . . . . I think, and this is my argument all along, is that we’ve lost time to explore issues to do with ICT in terms of somewhere about being able to talk about issues of teaching and learning.

Beta

Feelings at the end of semester two

By the end of the year when the combined assessment had been delivered twice all of the lecturers felt that the link had been a success. “I think its more than met one’s expectations for how it has worked out” Omega, “I think in every case its probably for me, gone better.” Alpha
A major reason for the positive attitude was a consensus that there had been a noticeable improvement in the quality of student work compared to previous years.

“Initially at the beginning of the year I wasn’t really rapt in the idea but I’m quite happy now at least they’ve been able to put in quality.”

Beta

The outcomes were superb I think from Juno’s perspective, she was absolutely amazed at the quality of the student work.”

Omega

“I think there was a higher overall performance this time.”

Alpha

From Omega’s perspective there was a belief that the link had also been beneficial in raising the prestige of the Centre for Technology, “I think what’s always interested me is that from a public relations point of view its considerably raised our profile down here.” Omega

Another lecturer also saw benefits for the ICT lecturers themselves,

“I think it’s been beneficial for us to be exposed to other people’s professional input into our course I think that’s beneficial for us to be open to scrutiny and professional discussion about what we do and the feedback that we get from them.”

Theta

Although there had been a clear change to a more positive view or the link with PI there were still a number of issues which concerned the ICT lecturers at the end of the first year. The first of these was a feeling that the essential themes of the ICT module were being lost.

“I suppose again I probably could say, its still slipping off the end, the implications of ICT for teaching”

Beta

‘Many of the research tasks were very formal, historical like the role of native schools, this sort of thing so very rarely did the students reach into the area of ICT and Maori students which they did in the first semester so I’d be looking towards taking a much more proactive stance on that next year”

Omega

“That’s one of the concerns that’s come up for me this time is that there’s . . .a lack . . . of what we’re actually teaching. That comes out of last time as well. I felt our learning outcomes were dumbing down the process.”

Beta

“I think we need to define themes . . . we need to bring in the literacy to that experience.”

Theta

The marking criteria and the consistency of marking were still a matter of contention even after the experience of assessing the task a second time. Tied in with this was a continuing uncertainty about the relative roles of the ICT and PI lecturers and a feeling of some ICT lecturers that they were being placed in a subordinate position by the PI lecturer.

“I think this marking schedule has got to be sorted out, . . .The students were presenting more that wasn’t being acknowledged on the marking scheme.”

Beta

“I’m not absolutely convinced that if a group was marked by another pair of lecturers we could guarantee the same mark which doesn’t mean we’d
be out by a lot but at the moment I don’t think we know enough about what each other is doing.”

Theta

“Then I’ve had a variance in terms of the classes that I’ve seen and presentations and what the PI lecturer has done in comparison with me, . . . we need to sit down and discuss what the roles are or do they merge or don’t they but he for me, I felt almost stepped over my jurisdiction and maybe he could have done more about the actual topic. That’s where its all falling apart for me, or that’s where I’m finding I can’t really work out who’s doing what.”

Beta

“I was being encroached on, well what was my role, so again there was this feeling. I have to say, I don’t know whether it’s me or what but I still felt I don’t know, PI walked in and they were in control. Somehow they were still more important. I let it go.”

Alpha

The timing of the class work in the two centres also caused some problems for the ICT lecturers who needed time to provide the students with the necessary practical technical skills and research skills required if a successful outcome to the task was to be achieved.

“I was wanting to start my investigation and knowing that I needed this time, PI hadn’t even started to talk Treaty of Waitangi so I was constrained by that and it made it very difficult for some of my classes, particularly one class that I felt that the whole time they weren’t supported in some ways. They hadn’t got the information so they couldn’t start. In the end I finally gave up in frustration and said well go and look at the Treaty.”

Beta

A final cause for concern was a perception that the link had resulted in a greater workload, :So I think probably it would be fair to say that ICT staff in general probably bore a much higher burden of work load,” (Alpha), “Oh yes, I think my workload this time has increased hugely.” (Omega)

The internal dissensions within the ICT lecturing team that had been present in the previous year at the time the link was originally being debated were still present a year later.

“I still think we probably lack as a group of lecturers, cohesion and understanding.”

Gamma

“We’ve been quite happy to sort of, we laugh about being on the edge but we also deal with things that keep us out of mainstream practice of the rest of the centres. Its not always useful to be very proud of that the whole time, sometimes its useful to have elements of doubt which get us into useful self-review. . . . I thought we needed a bit of a shake up.”

Theta

“I’m still concerned that some staff perhaps in ICT don’t always see it as being a positive venture into ICT. They feel that the whole area of ICT is being compromised because we’re focusing on the Treaty and I think that’s a little challenge which staff may want to take on board, to see how they can actually change their thinking and turn the whole exercise into something positive.”
Some have been pleased, some have been a bit shattered. From my perception there’s been a variety of viewpoints and a lot of it hasn’t had anything to do with the relationship between the courses but more the personal dialogue between the staff.”

At the conclusion of the years trial not only were the ICT lecturers anxious to carry on the link the next year, they were also starting to look forward to a time when they could create similar links with other centres. In the final interviews “language ICT integrated or maths and ICT integrated”(Theta), “PE or Health”(Omega) and “Science” (Beta) were mentioned for possible future collaboration.

Discussion
Although the study only focused on the experiences and perceptions of the ICT lecturers involved, a number of significant themes emerged from the study which may be of relevance to other groups contemplating similar collaboration.

There would seem to be a need to involve all interested parties in the development process as soon as possible. The two lecturers who most resisted the link and who had the most negative attitude to it were those who had been least involved in the process. Although they became more positive as the year progressed they still harboured the greatest concerns at the end of the year.

During the development process the teaching teams from the two centres only met once. This gave rise to a lack of a shared understanding as to the nature of the relationship between lecturers as the task was implemented. In the first semester this relationship varied from extremely close to dysfunctional, and from constant interaction to no communication occurring until the day of the group presentations. It might have been expected that these relationships would stabilize in the second semester as staff went through the process for the second time but this did not happen. One reason for this continued tension would seem to be due to a number of new staff in the PI teaching team and the small number of continuing partnerships from semester one. A second reason is related to the feeling of some ICT staff that the process was being taken over by the PI lecturer and their role was being under-valued. This had resulted in a resolve on the part of most ICT lecturers to take a much more proactive approach to their relationships with the PI lecturers in the forthcoming year.

The two teams only met once during the year to evaluate the success of the trial. This meeting at the end of semester one did not attempt to address problems that had emerged. This lack of discussion and reflection meant that genuine concerns with regard to moderation and consistency of marking still remained strong at the end of the year. These were not new concerns, as similar disquiet had been constantly expressed in previous years when the ICT assessment task had been independently carried out within the Centre for Technology. There had been an assumption that the joint marking process might alleviate these concerns but that did not turn out to be the case.

Many of the ICT lecturers also felt that the integrity of their subject had been comprised by the link with PI. An essential element of the ICT module is a focus on the unique pedagogy associated in teaching and learning in an ICT rich environment. A strongly expressed perception was that this crucial element was being lost, particularly in the second semester where the topics tended to become much more historically associated with a resulting lessening of the link to the use of ICT in the education sphere.

The development process and the discussions regarding the acceptance of the proposal had also shown up some personal and philosophical divisions within the ICT teaching team. The experience
of working through the new link did not seem to create any greater unity and at the end of the year these divisions were still quite apparent. It may well be that these internal divisions played a significant part in the failure to develop clear and consistent working relationships with the PI lecturers.

Despite the concerns expressed the trial was seen as a great success by the ICT lecturers and they were all keen to continue the combined assessment task into future years. The success of the link was such that it was seen by all as a model for other future relationships with other centres in the college.

References