

Transforming Assessment via global and local learning networks

Mathew Hillier

Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation
University of Queensland
m.hillier@uq.edu.au

Karen Sheppard

Institute for Teaching and Learning Innovation
University of Queensland
k.sheppard@uq.edu.au

This paper looks at the nature of an online professional development activity that facilitates a nexus between local and global learning networks for academics and practitioners in e-assessment. The ‘Transforming Assessment’ e-assessment programme, commenced in 2009 with webinars and online e-assessment examples featured on a purpose built website. Expansion and continued sustainability saw an online conference added in 2013, a localised resource added in 2014 and in 2015 a re-developed website was launched. Using the CIPP (context, input, process, and product) evaluation approach (Stufflebeam, 2000), rich sources of both qualitative and quantitative evaluation data were collected across the life of the programme from over 1380 participants with a picture emerging of a low cost, high impact model of dissemination of diverse e-assessment practices, bringing together global and local learning networks. A proposal is made to further deepen connections between the global webinar forum and local activity within institutions in order to enhance the impact of this professional development activity.

Keywords: webinars, professional development, learning networks

Introduction

In this age of digital learning spaces there is continuous focus on where, what and how students learn, however there seems to be less opportunities for staff in higher education to undertake professional development in these same ways. While traditional “on the ground” professional development opportunities still exist they do not fit the new model of collaborative online learning being promoted as state of the art learning and teaching. This paper explores an online approach that ‘walks the talk’ of online learning that affords the opportunity for staff to gain an understanding of the rapidly evolving digital world of assessment methods. The programme serves as an extended, online professional learning network (Trust, 2012) or a network of practice (Seely Brown & Duguid, 2000) and provides a forum for participants to discuss issues and share their own ideas for e-assessment at a local and global level.

Background

The ‘Transforming Assessment’ e-assessment programme began as a result of Professor Geoffrey Crisp’s two year Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC) National Teaching Fellowship that commenced 2009. It aimed to “develop strategies to assist teachers and higher education institutions align their learning, teaching and assessment practices in a rapidly changing digital context” (Crisp, 2009). The fellowship focused on building resources

around the assessment of students in web 2.0, collaborative, distributed, virtual learning environments (Crisp, 2011, p. 5).

Deliverables included a report, a website of e-assessment resources and a series of well attended webinars (web-based seminars) where guest speakers shared their understanding of e-assessment topics with a local and international audience. An external evaluation of the fellowship provided evidence of an informal, not quite “community of practice” that had developed from the interactions within the webinar series. It was recognised that the program had the potential for expansion into the future and that the emergent community, while not necessarily formally controlled, was seen as an important element in the future sustainability of the programme (Gannaway & Sheppard, 2011).

The two main proponents of the program were able to continue their work on a voluntary basis with in-kind support from RMIT University and The University of Queensland and in 2013 an Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) extension grant was awarded. The grant led by Dr Hillier provided the means to upgrade the online e-assessment resources and continue the webinar series. It also facilitated the establishment of a joint online conference (in association with University of Dundee, UK and Soffed UK) to showcase e-assessment research. The conference was one of two key initiatives designed to achieve recognition at a global and local level. The second initiative saw a mirrored, localised online e-assessment examples resource developed within The University of Queensland (Hillier & Crisp, 2014) during 2014. A further chapter in the Transforming Assessment story is its evolution into a Special Interest Group (SIG) within the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) in late 2014. The SIG aims to ensure the continuation of the resources website, the monthly webinars and the joint online conference while providing an expanded audience for the program (ASCILITE, 2014).

Evaluation framework

The original external evaluation team commissioned by Professor Crisp for his ALTC Fellowship adopted the CIPP Evaluation Model (Stufflebeam, 1983) to examine the 'context, input, process and product' of the program. The CIPP evaluation strategy, developed in the 1960s, is designed to allow the proponents to learn while doing (Zhang et al., 2011) and thus offers a useful reflection tool for those taking part in the process. The CIPP Model's operational definition of evaluation is “the process of delineating, obtaining, reporting, and applying descriptive and judgmental information about some object's merit, worth, probity, and significance to guide decision making, support accountability, disseminate effective practices, and increase understanding of the involved phenomena” (Stufflebeam, 2005, p. 61). At the heart of this model is the aim to improve the program rather than to prove its worth and this is the fundamental purpose of evaluation according to those proponents of the model (Stufflebeam, 2003; Stufflebeam, 2005; Zhang et al., 2011). Thus the evaluation strategy considers the context, input, process, and product and so the evaluators asked: What needs to be done? How should it be done? Is it being done? Is it succeeding? (Stufflebeam, 2005). To answer these questions a rich set of data, both qualitative and quantitative was collected over the various stages of the program.

An additional model focused on the evaluation of training programs developed by Kirkpatrick (1994) commonly cited in the literature, was used to help us supplement our conception of the nature and impact of participation in terms of changed practices. This model has four main levels covering:

1. Reaction to the training event itself, such as satisfaction.
2. Learning as result of participating in the training event. Typically measured during the training in the form of either a knowledge demonstration or test.
3. Behavioural change or transfer of learning to the job. Evaluation of this nature usually occurs through observation.
4. Results or outcomes that occurred due to attendance and participation in a training event. Examples include an increase in revenue or improvements in performance.

The higher levels present additional challenges because the data is more difficult to collect, as the evidence is only apparent after some time has elapsed and distance from the training event is greatest. In the case of the webinars this is exacerbated given the predominantly external nature of participation in sessions and the one-shot topics offered each month.

Data Collection

The original evaluation undertaken in 2011 followed a formative process requiring periodic reports to be delivered based on analysis of data as the fellowship proceeded. During the second phase of the project from 2013, the project team collected attendance data and feedback in the form of a voluntary online survey after every webinar. This online survey contained questions which attempted to tap into data covering level 3 and 4 of Kirkpatrick's (1994) model, although this was in the form of the intentions of participants rather than direct observation. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected around prior knowledge and experience, gain in knowledge from the session and future intentions in the form of follow up activities. In the most recent round of evaluation undertaken in 2014, members of the Transforming Assessment database community were invited to participate in short phone interviews or asked to complete a more general online survey similar to the one administered in 2011. This enabled a longitudinal evaluation of progress.

Findings

A summary of the evaluation findings up to the completion of the Fellowship in 2011 can be found in Table 1. The 2011 evaluation also suggested that a time interval would be necessary to assess the actual outcomes of the Fellowship including which elements of the project had been embedded, sustained and possibly up scaled. The extension grant has offered the research team a unique opportunity to assess the outcomes of this project over six years.

Table 1: Summary of evaluation findings (2009-2011)

CIPP outcomes	Indicators
Context- assesses the needs, capacities and problems within a defined environment	There appeared to be a clear need for the program of activities planned for the Fellowship
	The target audience for the program of activities was diverse in terms of experience, expertise and capacity to adopt
	The capacity of participants to change practices during the time period of the fellowship is limited.
Input – assesses the work plan and budgets of the approach	The program progressed according to work plans
	The communication strategy adopted was a powerful mechanism for raising awareness.
Process-monitor, document and assess program activities	The webinars were positively received by the targeted audience
	Tracking individual participants is difficult, making measuring potential impact of the webinars in the long term difficult to monitor.

	The program of activities was responsive to feedback from the target audience
Product-reach, quality and significance of program including intended and unintended outcomes	The program of activities facilitated multiple opportunities for engagement
	The range of activities shows a breadth of engagement with the target audience
	The Fellowship had national and international reach
	The webinars had a high level of engagement
Effectiveness	Fellowship activities had been having an impact in the target audience
Sustainability	The program’s contributions have the potential to be continued over time.
Transportability	Outcomes used to provide impetus for other projects

The data collected during the extension grant demonstrated clearly that the project team had been able to enhance the global dissemination and the sustainability of the existing webinar activities and web-based resources. Over 1060 attendances were recorded across the 35 globally available extension grant events. Locally, within UQ, the team was able to develop internal dissemination of e-assessment ideas and concepts through custom online resources. In addition, UQ gained top spot in the engagement rankings with 122 staff members joining the Transforming Assessment community.

Continuation and extension to the Transforming Assessment webinar program was evident with increased numbers attending the regular monthly webinar sessions. The growth in the series is represented in Figure 1 which shows RSVP, attendance and recording access for the years 2010 to 2014. Covering the period of the extension grant, 11 webinars were held during 2013 and 10 sessions were held in 2014. There were 400 attendances across the 11 sessions held in 2013 up from 260 across 11 sessions in 2012. This represents an average of 36 attendees per webinar in the 2013 series up from an average of 24 attendances per session in 2012. Attendance was up moderately in 2014 with an average of 39 participants per session across the 10 sessions held. An earlier analysis of attendance demographics was presented by Hillier and Crisp (2013).

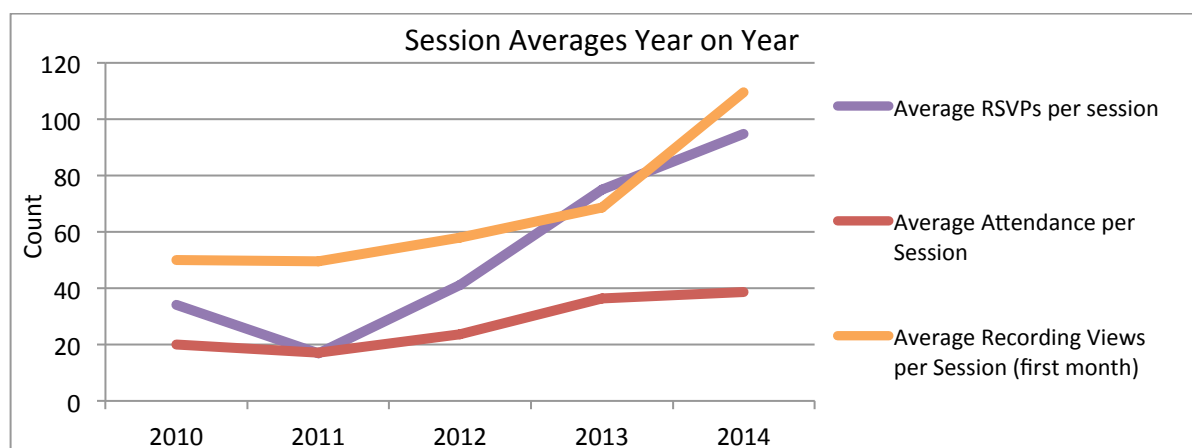


Figure 1: Audience growth for webinar sessions

Each session was recorded and published on an open access basis online. Abstract pages for each session, containing a session description, presentation slides, session chat log, contact points for presenters and links to further resources, was published on the Transforming

Assessment website. Full-length video recordings of each session were published to YouTube with links to and from the abstract pages. Across 2013 an average of 69 people viewed each session recording within the first month of release, up from 58 per recording in 2012. This figure has jumped again in 2014 with an average of 110 first month views per recording published in 2014.

Two onsite face-to-face seminar sessions were run in Brisbane in January 2014 to discuss 'confidence based e-assessment' attracting 41 participants and Singapore in July 2014 on 'e-assessment and e-exams' attracting 37 participants.

This level of participation was beyond the project team's initial expectations and is indicative of the uptake of the webinars and website. It is also worth highlighting that the electronic resources continue to provide value to the education community even several years after their initial development. This is evident in that the Transforming Assessment YouTube channel that hosts the session recordings and additional e-assessment demonstrations has attracted just over 100,000 views since its inception in 2010.

During the 2014 webinar series a question was added to the post-session survey focused in the intention of participants in terms of follow up actions. Out of the 387 webinar attendances during the year, the 135 responses received are displayed in Figure 2. These responses provide an indication of the likely impact of the session in terms of being able to change work practices or at least incite actions along these lines. A significant 58% of respondents indicated that they intended to 'apply something they had learnt in the session in their work' while 31% said they would 'consider starting a trial or project related to this topic'. The operation of professional learning networks as a means to disseminate ideas presented in the session was a strong feature with 85% of respondents indicating they would 'tell colleagues about the session or topic'. The intention of participants to leverage their attendance at the session to expand their own learning networks was evident to a lesser degree with 19% intending to follow up with the speaker and 9% indicating they would contact other attendees they had met during the session.

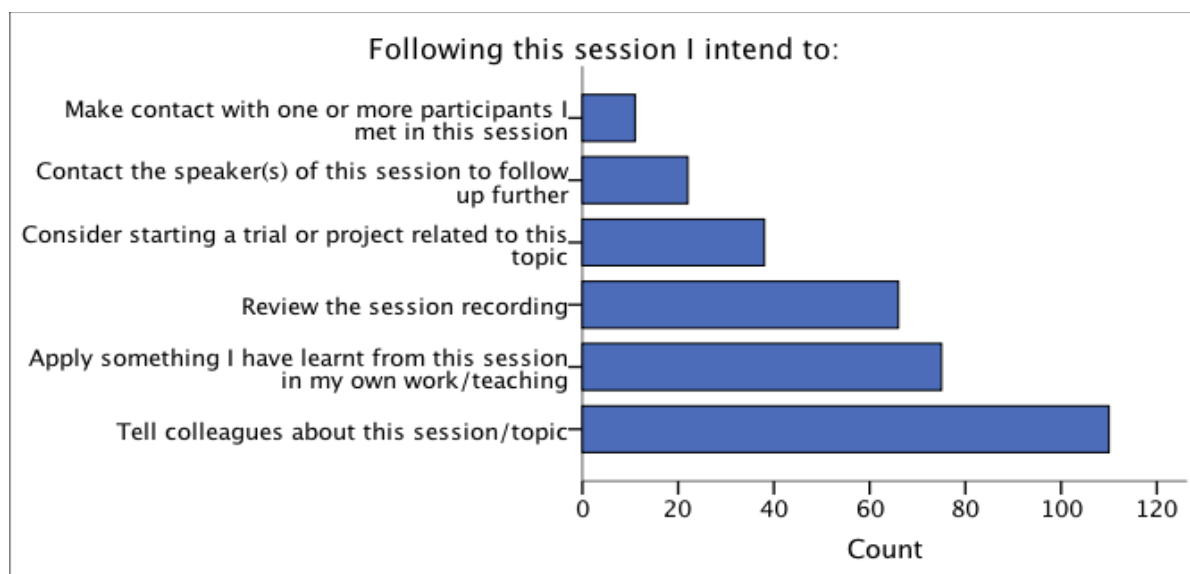


Figure 2: Participant future intentions (2014)

Participants in the 2014 webinars were also invited to complete a questionnaire that was similar to the evaluation survey used in 2011. The qualitative data collected offers some

insight into the perceived value of interaction between the local (institutional level) and the global (international perspective). One attendee commented:

The online seminars are a very valuable resource and the online community which has developed around them has the potential to continue to be an international forum. The opportunity to hear how trials of new approaches in other parts of the world and to share practice could be of enormous benefit particularly in thinking about a topic like moving all assessment online.

The international theme of the comments was also expanded to the idea of a “global community of practitioners” able to share practice and hear about “trials of new approaches in other parts of the world”, while the worth of the international contact is highlighted participants also offered insight into how they engaged with the ideas at a more local level. The potential to “to learn what is happening elsewhere so that it can inform practice in our own institution” was one understanding and to be able “to draw on the resources when making recommendations for future institutional activities” was another. Local influence on colleagues was also featured as an outcome of participation at an international level and the “personal connections for professional development” at both levels were seen to be valuable. There was also recognition of the convenience and efficiency of the online platform which makes it “easy to participate even within a busy schedule” and what one commentator described as “access to a concentrated, human curated resource of thought, people and ideas”. The nature of delivery recognises that “time is a unit of currency” for professional learners and thus it is essential for them to access professional development and resources when required.

Finally, the relationship and potential disconnect between global participation and local implementation is one of interest to the research team as it appears to be a desired outcome of participants to embed some of the ideas from Transforming Assessment at a local level. One participant shares her aspirations to “having local events built on the webinars” however being frustrated she had not been able to make it happen to date. This key tension is the focus of the remainder of this paper.

The global and the local

There are many who consider educational professional development and learning has become a global concern (Knight, Tait, & Yorke, 2006; Stevenson & Bauer, 2014; Teräs, 2014) and the solution is often seen as being via event-delivery modes. While national and international conferences, workshops and external courses have become common methods of provision, there continues to be problems associated with embedding the learning into the workplace following attendance at such events. Challenges include lack of interest from colleagues, the organisation rules and norms that may not accommodate the new understandings, the ability for the recipients to translate their understanding into something practical and their place in their organisation that affords them a level of power from which to operate and influence outcomes (Knight et al., 2006). A more useful view is that professional learning should be systemic and involve individuals interacting with their environment at a local level, thus promoting development of capabilities around situated social practices (Knight et al., 2006).

How to meet the needs of the sometimes diverging notions of global and local professional learning is problematic. The very definition of global and local is itself contested. Jean-Sebastien (2009) outlines several definitions in the social sciences, but finds none to be satisfactory on their own. In political science, Modelski (1972) says that the local is a subset

of the global. In sociology, Giddens (1984) posits it to be about structuration delineated by proximity of influences; face-to-face interactions versus interaction between individuals at a distance or separated by time. It is also recognised that distant interactions or activity can impact on local lives and daily activity. Jean-Sebastien (2009) also outlines the idea of global and local as related to size and range of the group, although these can't be measured in the quantitative sense.

We would like to add that the local and global can be usefully demarcated by the content of the discourse occurring, such that topics, ideas and concerns become relevant or are appropriate. For example, an innovation in e-assessment can be generally presented or communicated to a global audience however it needs to become meaningful and operationalised within a local, institutional context in order to be successfully implemented. Such discussions at a local level would incorporate, even if tacitly, concerns for politics, power, resources, as relevant to the department or institution.

We offer a tentative understanding of how to build a professional learning network that offers access and builds capacity at both levels. Knight et al. (2006) suggest four ways of accessing professional learning development. Firstly, it is considered an everyday opportunity where practitioners engage with each other in the workplace “learning as they do”. A second opportunity is via engagement with national committees, boards and review panels. A third is through courses and workshops organised both internally and externally. The fourth opportunity is in cyberspace where the activities such as the “Transforming Assessment” e-assessment webinar activities were firmly located (Stevenson & Bauer, 2014).

While we hesitate to label these webinar activities as a true community of practice they bear some of the hall marks of a “distributed” community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) in their utilisation of the Web in lieu of face to face interaction, their linkage of members across time and geographical barriers and the quality of the online communications between members. Thus we borrow the terminology of a distributed learning community (Cho, Lee, Stefanone, & Gay, 2005) or potentially a professional learning network to describe the group that has sprung up from the webinar series.

That being said the nature of the learning between these types of activities varies in that the dynamic of the networking opportunity changes the scope of the discussions taking place. This tension described by Wenger (1999) as the sometimes problematic and yet necessary interplay between the global and the local. This duality of purpose is inherent in the challenges of sharing one’s local practice with others and conversely communicating a much more global agenda and making it locally relevant and valuable (Barab, MaKinster, & Scheckler, 2003). The discussions that would take place between members of a local learning group within an institution are embedded in this context and would tend to be focused on particular institutional concerns while the discussions taking place in a global forum such as an international conference, would tend towards less context specific matters of current discipline wide progress and commonality. This mismatch, combined with differences in space and time between global and local discussions can sometimes create a sense of inertia (Mayela, 2014) in the “distributed” learning community. Real outcomes can be difficult to realise as individuals return to the reality of their institutions. It is at this point it becomes important for the community to illustrate ways to develop tangible evidence of value (Mayela, 2014) to its participants while encouraging them to recontextualise their learning at an institutional level. Opportunities and mechanisms to share learning from outside, into a local context are thus required.

Efforts to circumvent this issue have seen some success. One example of an off-line attempt to bring the global and the local together is the Learning Analytics Summer Institute (LASI) 'locals'. These are gatherings hosted within institutions where selected material from the larger main event is re-presented by local group members and discussed. Another example is the Transforming Assessment webinars which have served to bring together groups from institutions into a forum connected to a global higher education discussion. And while the webinars have achieved a measure of approbation there still scope for improvement. One survey participant commented:

It is critical that the opportunity for presentation and review continues - the (webinar) forums are the OLTs answer to TED. There is no other forum where individuals can engage and get a sense of relativity or benchmark their practice (in this area).

This has been more effective at some institutions than others with a critical mass of local participants (connections between local and global networks) likely to be required before the local and global themes can come together in discussion. The number of members of Transforming Assessment from any given institution is relatively sparse in most cases however several institutions have achieved considerable penetration across a range of job roles and levels. As of February 2015 there were just over 500 organisations represented. There are currently 38 institutions that have 10 or more active members in Transforming Assessment (see Figure 3 for a list). The average membership from each organisation in this top group is 21, with the University of Queensland the highest at 115.

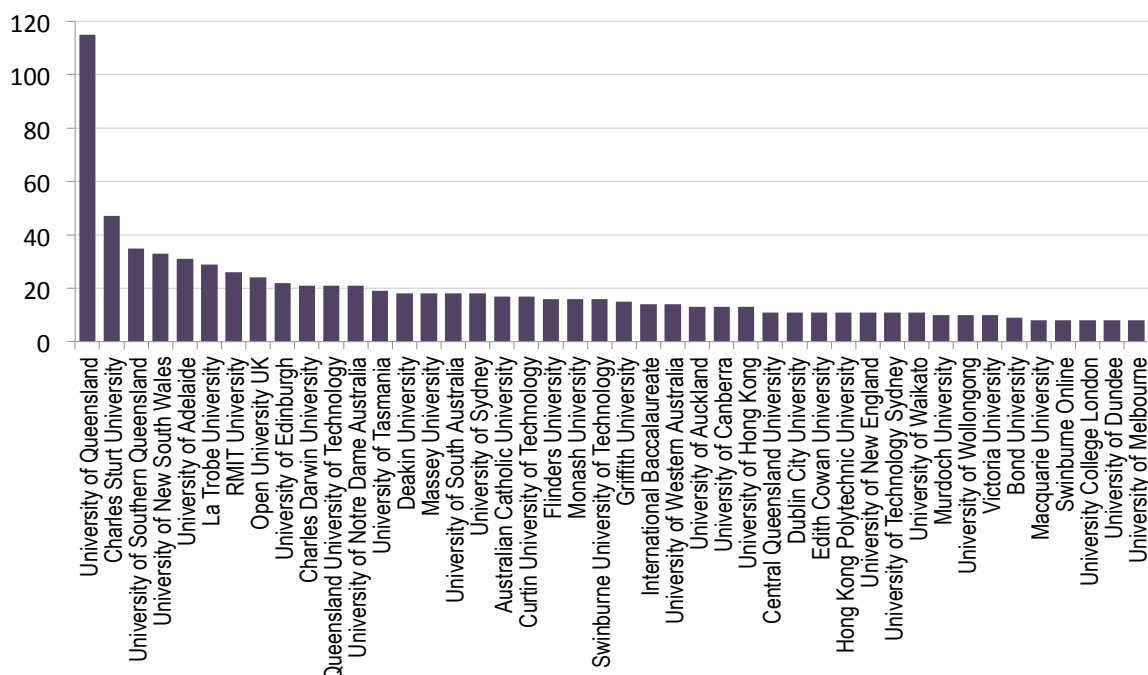


Figure 3: Institutions with greater than ten members.

The majority of the mixing effect observed so far has been that the ideas presented in the online sessions have begun to permeate into individual institutions in an ad-hoc manner. The local issues have yet to cycle back into the global forum other than through individual comments made during sessions. It could be argued that the sometimes sensitive nature of local issues that are often embedded in local politics are not considered suitable for airing in a global forum and so this presents a barrier to the mixing of the two streams of discussion. If

the mix is going to happen it is probably going to occur within a localised context. The barriers are therefore likely to be broken-down if a mechanism is established to allow the global to be more effectively brought into the local context within a focused forum.

The proposed approach involves establishing 'Transforming Assessment locals' within the institutions with a larger number of members. A critical mass is likely to be required in order to establish a local discussion group that maintains momentum over time and strong connections to the global forum. The local groups would be run in conjunction with or as closely as possible to the webinars to maintain momentum, immediacy and the thematic connection.

It is hoped that this next phase in the expansion of the Transforming Assessment programme will allow the development of deeper links into individual institutions. This idea is to appoint leaders in an institution who will organise and facilitate local face-to-face venues for discussion such that the ideas from the webinar can be immediately discussed within the local context. This will provide opportunities for local issues to emerge in discussion in order to contextualise the idea, innovation or method being discussed in the webinars.

Two main models for the Transforming Assessment locals may be required given the challenges of working across time zones.

- *Live locals*: Connections between the webinar and groups of local live audiences are established with local facilitators maintaining the connection and passing messages back from the group to the webinar. This has already occurred on an informal basis with small groups sitting together to watch the webinar. The scaling up of this could see lecture theatres or tutorial rooms used on campus with the webinar window and audio projected into the room. In order to maintain interactivity during this time individuals within the local group could also connect with their mobile devices directly into the webinar (muting their device audio to avoid echo). The local facilitator could then extend the discussion around Q&A times and following the webinar session to explore local implications and issues in greater depth.
- *Flipping the local*: In this model individuals could join the webinar from their own desk or home and then come together in the hours or day following the webinar for a local facilitated discussion. Similarly the webinar recordings could be used as a precursor to the local discussions, although the opportunity for interaction with the webinar speaker would be forgone.

Effective facilitation will be essential for stimulating the discussion at a local level and to ensure that outcomes such as cross disciplinary networking, starting joint projects and initiating trials can be taken forward. New online facilities for the organisation of webinars will assist local facilitators to prepare in that they will have access to the presenter's slides in advance of the live webinar. Sharing of tips and discussion points between facilitators via an online message board could also increase their effectiveness and opportunities for learning. Gatherings arranged in the side-lines of a suitable annual conference would assist in building a network of webinar facilitators.

Conclusion

The Transforming Assessment programme has been successful in raising awareness of the progress and potential for e-assessment in higher education. This has largely occurred via the use of contemporary online professional learning approaches such as webinars that have operated at a national and international level. The tentative mixing of a global discussion into the local contexts within institutions had begun. However, crossing this divide presents additional challenges. It is proposed that a global and local strategy is further developed with 'Transforming Assessment locals' being run within institutions in conjunction with global webinars. It is hoped that this will facilitate the local contextualisation necessary for ideas from the global forum to be embedded within the practices of institutions.

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