

## Advanced Development Retreats – Supplementary Information

### Retreat Details

Following a consultative review and comprehensive procurement process the University decided to change its Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) provider. The University's VLE at the time was Blackboard and although training and resources were made available to staff, the majority used the VLE as a content repository rather than taking advantage of the more interactive tools available. As part of the change to the new VLE, D2L's Brightspace, face-to-face awareness, planning and training sessions, and a series of online resources were made available to all staff in both how-to guide and screencast video format. However, it was recognised that to achieve an improvement in pedagogic practice rather than just a migration of materials from one system to another, these resources were not enough on their own. To overcome the barriers to using technology to enhance learning and leverage the full power of the new system, something more substantial needed to be offered to staff, and so a series of advanced development retreats were run at the University in the summer of 2018 to support academic staff develop and enhance their online teaching spaces.

The Advanced Development Retreats were initiated and supported by the University's Pro-Vice Chancellor for Teaching and Learning. This included setting out the aims for the retreats, financial support, and encouraging buy-in from all seven academic Schools across the University. The intention was for course teams to attend as a group to develop resources and enhancement features for specific modules and programmes, and so the opportunity to participate was advertised to academics across the University through the Directors of Teaching and Learning for each School, via social media, and on the University's staff development website. The retreat format was partly inspired by the concept of 'writing

retreats', a proven format within the University and wider literature for promoting academic productivity (Kornhaber et al., 2016).

Attending an introductory presentation was the first step for staff to get involved, and a series of these were run to reach as many staff across the University as possible. The aim was to set out the purpose of the retreats – a space to develop more advanced and engaging features, whilst also talking about practical arrangements and the preliminary work that prospective participants would need to complete. A teaching case study, showcasing a wide range of technology enabled approaches, underpinned by theory, was also shared to demonstrate the type of resources that could be developed and built during the retreats and get participants to reflect on their teaching practice and think about how they could use pedagogy-led technology-enhanced learning to support active-learning in their modules. The introductory sessions concluded with facilitated discussion groups to help prospective participants develop initial ideas for the enhancement features they could create during the retreats.

Each course team that wanted to attend the retreats had to complete an application form that described what resources would be developed, how these would improve outcomes for students, and how they would be able to measure the impact of these on student learning. The application forms reinforced the need for participants to complete basic training, have built basic module content, and prepare supporting material in advance of the retreats. All applications were reviewed by the lead-facilitators in advance of the retreats to check that the enhancement features were ambitious and offered students opportunities to consolidate their learning. In some cases, it was necessary to go back to course teams for clarification about the details of resources proposed or to check the level of ambition in the

plans. Where necessary, follow-up meetings with the course team were arranged to further develop plans.

The basic online training that had to be completed in advance of the retreats was part of a package of training developed to help all staff in the institution become competent users of the new VLE, D2L's Brightspace. As such, this requirement was not an additional burden on participants but was to make sure they could focus on the pedagogical course design and use of tools instead of just getting to grips with the basics of the new system, therefore gaining maximum benefit from the retreat being about advanced development.

The requirement to develop and bring along underpinning material was a central tenet of the retreat design. From the very start of the process, it was clear that the retreats were to be about *building* interactive resources and not about planning resources, generating ideas or creating basic content. As such, the preparation of material in advance was key to ensuring that the focus of the retreats would be on the building of interactive resources and helped address the barrier of course teams finding an opportunity to get together to focus on actual course creation.

#### [How the retreats worked](#)

The retreats ran as 2-day residential retreats away from the University campus at Northern College, Wentworth Castle. One night's accommodation and all meals were funded for all participants and facilitators. The aim of making the retreats off-site was to remove distractions and to create a shared sense of purpose amongst participants. Each retreat was supported by the lead-facilitators and by the University's Customer Success Manager from

D2L. Additional support and expertise were drafted in in response to the particular development aims of the course teams attending each retreat.

The retreat was built around a number of 'shut-up and build' sessions, which were punctuated by introductory/summing-up sessions, progress reporting, opportunities for 'show-and-tell', and short bursts of specialist input. The 'shut-up and build' sessions allowed participants to get on with building their resources in a supported environment, with facilitators either staffing a 'help desk' to provide ad-hoc support or assigned to specific groups to support the development of a specific feature, such as quizzes, screencasts, e-portfolios etc. The inclusion of progress reporting/'show-and-tell' was designed to motivate participants with interim deadlines and provide opportunities for exchanging ideas and good practice. Specialist input consisted of short presentations about advanced features of Brightspace from our D2L Customer Success Manager and educational technology demonstrations from the lead-facilitators.

## Breakdown of Retreat Participants

Table 2 – The number of people involved in the retreats

	Retreat 1	Retreat 2	Retreat 3	Totals
<b>Number of participants</b>	11	13	9	33
<b>Number of Course Teams</b>	4	5	4	13
<b>Number of Schools Represented</b>	3	4	4	5*
<b>Number of University staff facilitating</b>	3	4	3	5*
<b>Number of D2L staff facilitators</b>	1	1	1	1*
<b>Total facilitators</b>	4	5	4	6*
<b>Total people attending</b>	15	18	13	

\*The totals here represent the number of unique people/Schools so is not the sum of the rows (as some of the same people facilitated more than one session).

## References

Kornhaber, R., Cross, M., Betihavas, V. & Bridgman, H. (2016) 'The benefits and challenges of academic writing retreats: an integrative review', *Higher education research and development*, vol. 35, no. 6, pp. 1210-1227. doi:10.1080/07294360.2016.1144572