

The semi-formal benchmarking of TEL practice: Helping the TEL community get its act together

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Over the last year, two major sector-wide events were held that have brought together technology enhanced learning (TEL) professionals from across the country to semi-formally benchmark their practices in the use of new and emerging technologies. These events have focused on major trends with technologies such as virtual and augmented reality and the use of the Office 365 suite of tools with a special focus on the use of the Teams application. This paper reports on the findings of these two national Summits hosted and facilitated by Griffith University. The motivating force for these free Summits was to provide an open forum for the sharing of practice across Australian and New Zealand universities. The data gained through the formal evaluations of these activities indicated that the collegial nature of these events has assisted in stimulating an openness and willingness to share examples of good practice seen across the sector. This form of semi-formal benchmarking is both appreciated and highly valued as TEL professionals seek to push in to new territories and provide opportunities for this community to further share their practices.

Keywords: Semi-formal benchmarking, TEL, Teams, O365, Virtual and augmented reality

Introduction

Benchmarking comes in many forms within higher education (HE) and has become a central instrument for improving the performance of institutions across the globe (Al-Khalifa, 2015). When used effectively, it can help institutions position themselves within the highly competitive higher education environment (Epper, 1999). The Australian Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency (TEQSA) defines Benchmarking as:

A structured, collaborative learning process for comparing practices, processes or performance outcomes. Its purpose is to identify comparative strengths and weaknesses, as a basis for developing improvements in academic quality or performance. Benchmarking can also be defined as a quality process used to evaluate performance by comparing institutional practices with identified good practices across the sector (TEQSA, 2019).

Benchmarking was adapted more specifically for use in HE in the early 1990s in the USA, then in Australia, the UK and Europe by about 2000 (Jackson, 2001). From this point on, benchmarking has been used consistently in the Australasian HE sector as a continuous improvement tool, primarily in response to the government introducing a series of quality standards (Bridgland & Goodacre, 2005). However, benchmarking is not one common set of practices, rather Bhutta & Huq (1999) suggest that there are many models currently in use, including: Performance Benchmarking, Process Benchmarking, Strategic Benchmarking, Internal Benchmarking, Competitive Benchmarking, Functional Benchmarking and Generic Benchmarking. In addition to this list of benchmarking models, Collaborative Benchmarking is a newer model that has subsequently emerged and would share many of the features found in some of these models (Sankey & Padro, 2019).

Semi-formal Benchmarking is similar to, but simpler than Collaborative Benchmarking which is the structured comparison of a process or organisation with others engaged in similar activities relevant to the domain being measured (Sankey & Padró, 2016). It is used to create a shared understanding about the needs for improvement (Arnold, Rush, Bessant & Hobday, 1998), without having to use a formal instrument for the measurement of outcomes. For the two case studies described in this paper, Semi-formal Benchmarking involves people (representing their HE institutions) formally coming together from across Australasia, with the express purpose of both sharing their practice and to learn what others are doing around a specific topic. Unlike a conference or workshop, the intent is to improve 'institutional' understanding and practice.

The two events

In 2019, two higher education summits were hosted by Griffith University. The first Summit was held in February and was the 'AR + VR + MR + XR = #anewreality' Summit. This was a two day immersive learning event for

colleagues who manage emerging technologies, and/or are leading institutional practitioners. This event was kindly sponsored by ACODE (the Australasian Council on Open, Distance and eLearning) with staff from 20 institutions attending. The second event was the ‘Microsoft Office + Teams in Learning and Teaching Summit’. Its focus was on the use of a select suite of Microsoft tools including, Teams, OneNote, Sway, Forms, and Stream and was kindly sponsored by Microsoft. This event was attended by 16 universities. As both events were free for participants, institutions were asked to nominate up to two representatives who would be willing to share their practices, strengths and weaknesses. Information about these two Summits may be found at:

- #anewreality <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/learning-futures/learnings-from-the-anewreality-immersive-symposium/>
- Microsoft Office + Teams in L&T Summit <https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/learning-futures/lt-strategies-shine-at-the-griffith-microsoft-365-summit/>

As these events were all about sharing current practice, we chose to limit the emphasis on ‘Key Note’ speakers, opting instead for a larger number of shorter, sharper presentations focusing on practice, not research. In other words, these were not academic research events, rather academic practice events focusing on pedagogy and what could be done with these tools to help fulfil the pedagogy being required.

Literature review

Noting this is an under theorised space prior to the Microsoft Summit, an environmental scan of the literature was conducted. Using Google Scholar, search terms included “Microsoft” AND “higher education” AND O365 which had 244 items listed. Table 1 shows the results of the search (with PowerPoint excluded due to the number of years it has been in use).

Table 1. Results of research articles on Office tools

O365 Tools	Articles total (n)	Journal (n)
O365	7	1
Teams	5	2
Sway	3	2
Forms	2	0
OneNote	7	1
Class Notebook	3	0
Stream	5	1
SharePoint	1	1

As can be seen from the above table, there are seven articles on O365, with six from conferences held in the past six years. Topics include moving staff to the cloud (Lyons & Parker, 2013), snapshots of software as a service (Akande & Van Bell, 2014; Stefanovic & Janjic, 2018) and security (Synnimaa, 2015). One paper was on learning and teaching (Ratnam, Sanghrajka, Su & Pawar, 2017). There were two journal articles about Microsoft Teams, one on using Teams with undergraduate law students (Martin & Tapp, 2019) and another general paper on social networking (Bello & Akpojar, 2019) and four conference papers, all being from the past two years. Sway had two journal articles with OneNote having seven articles with just one journal article. The journal article was on a comparison of OneNote and Evernote (Dinesh, Sontakke and Tamgire, 2019), while another article was on using OneNote as an ePortfolio tool (Golz, 2018). This short literature review provides evidence to the gaps in the literature with evidence that the research in using these tools to enhance learning and teaching has promising possibilities, particularly using the tools for curriculum and integration, work integrated learning, reflective practice, employability and graduate attributes.

Methodology

Attendees of the #anewreality Symposium were provided a short five question evaluation survey that focused on intended practice after the event, rather than on ‘was the morning tea nice’, as we already knew it would be. The survey contained three closed response (scale based) and two open-ended response questions. It also provided participants with a way to possibly plan what they would do for their institution on their return. For example, question four asked: ‘What are you thinking might be the next steps for you/your institution in relation to what you learned?’ The open ended questions underwent a thematic analysis to understand the top emergent themes.

For the O365 Summit, the team was interested first in ascertaining how extensively the newer tools in O365 were being used prior to the event, which required running a pre and post evaluation. From the pre-survey, 53 participants submitted data, with 64.15% (n=34) Griffith staff and 35.85% (n=19) external to Griffith. There were 42 participants who completed the post-survey. Questions asked included Likert Scale questions about their experiences, as well as how they will apply an idea from the Summit into their work in the next three weeks, the most useful part/s of the Summit and what improvements could be included in the future.

Results and Discussion

The results are presented here in two sections, one with the first workshop of AR + VR + MR + XR = #anewreality and the second being the Microsoft Summit.

AR + VR + MR + XR = #anewreality

Of the 60 attendees across the two days, 32 responses were received (53%). Of these, when participants were asked 'To what extent did you find the event personally helpful to your practice' on a five point scale from 'Very Helpful', to 'Not At All Helpful', 84% responded 'Very Helpful' with the remaining 16% responding 'Somewhat Helpful'. There were no responses in the negative. Participants were then asked, 'Would you be interested in attending another event like this in the future?' to this 100% responded 'Yes'. The clear reason for this is seen in the responses to the next question, 'To what extent was the information shared applicable to your institution and its direction?', to which 78% felt that it had been 'Very Applicable', with the remaining 22% stating it was 'Somewhat Applicable'. No respondent chose 'Not Applicable'.

The next part of the evaluation asked participants to explain possible next steps for their institution, based on what they had learned. The responses can be categorized into five main areas:

- A desire to gain a greater technical appreciation and the formal trialing of what can be done.
- Wanting to see more institution support and buy-in from management.
- Creating a minimal viable presence within their institutions.
- Wanting to extend this network of practitioners and continue to share through some form of community of practice.
- Formalise a plan for their institution against some form of technology enhanced learning framework.

As a result of the extremely positive response it was decided that ACODE and Griffith would run a similar event in 2020. The analysis of the qualitative data has also provided key themes that will help to focus the 2020 agenda.

Note: A range of extremely useful resources were collated from this event, along with recordings of the main presentations. These resources are openly available for attendees or for others who might find them useful. They are available on the ACODE website and accessible from: <https://www.acode.edu.au/mod/page/view.php?id=1663>

Microsoft Office + Teams in L&T Summit

From the Summit pre-survey results, participants had been working in higher education from 0-2 years (n=6) through to 21+ years (n=5) with 6-10 years (n=15) being the largest cohort and 11-15 years (n=13) the second largest cohort. 85% (n=45) of the participants had been using Microsoft O365 prior to attending the Summit, with only 15% (n=8) not using it previously. From the eight not using it currently, five said they would be using it in future. Participants were asked what tools they currently use in O365 for learning and teaching, with more than one answer able to be checked (see Table 2).

Microsoft Teams was used the most with 88.8% of Summit participants using it and 73.3% of participants using PowerPoint. Other tools being used included OneDrive, SharePoint, Word and Excel, Minecraft and Planner.

Table 2. Number of uses of each tool with % of the participants

Tool	Number	% of tool	% of 45 participants
Forms	19	13.1	42.2
OneNote	21	14.48	46.6
ClassNote	8	5.52	17.7
PowerPoint	33	22.76	73.3

Sway	9	6.21	20
Stream	8	5.52	17.7
Teams	40	27.59	88.8
Other	7	4.83	N/A (Several reasons listed)

Participants were also asked what they would like to get out of the two day Summit with 88.7% of participants checking they would like to “learn about what others are doing”. This is interesting as there was a lack of volunteers to present with many feeling it was early days and not comfortable presenting at the time. 75.4% wanted “to hear what’s new and possible”. Results are in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Reasons participants wanted to attend the Summit and percentage

	Number	Percentage	Percent of 53
Learn about what others are doing	47	20.35	88.7
Information on governance	14	6.06	26.4
Use case examples	35	15.15	66
Networking	29	12.55	54.7
To hear what’s new and possible	40	17.32	75.4
To hear what Microsoft have to present	31	13.42	58.4
To see David Kellerman present	14	6.06	26.4
To find out how to start using O365 for learning and teaching	21	9.09	39.6

Of particular note here is the high percentage response rates associated with the value proposition associated with what one could call semi-formal benchmarking practice, that is 88.7% (Learn about what others are doing) and 75.4 (To hear what’s new and possible). From the post Summit survey, participants were asked about their experiences (see Table 4) with participants “likely to apply this learning in my work” with a mean of 4.79. The Summit was hands on and “facilitators encouraged participant input” with a mean of 4.48.

Table 4. Post Summit survey results

	Mean	Std Deviation	Number of responses
I am likely to apply this learning in my work.	4.79	0.46	42
The Teams channel assisted me in this Summit.	4.33	0.75	42
The Summit included effective learning activities.	4.15	0.84	41
The facilitators encouraged participant input.	4.48	0.70	42
The facilitators knew their content well.	4.90	0.29	42
Did you get sufficient information to know what the other participating institutions were doing in this space?	4.39	0.76	41

The post summit survey had very high means, across all five items, which suggested that Summit participants gained a lot from attending the Summit. It was evident that more research into learning and teaching through the use of Microsoft is needed. Summit participants were really interested in keeping the community moving forward and another university offered a Sway webinar to improve group understanding of Sway. Other participants are also setting up other communities of practice around the tools provided. Further, a Teams space remains active, even though tenancy requires changing for externals.

The above results demonstrate the value of both events to the participants and a clear desire to participate in future events of this nature. Importantly, the lessons learned from these events are captured for others to continue to access and learn from.

Note: Resources from this symposium are still available on the Griffith website and accessible from: <https://teledvisors.net/blog/2019/07/14/office365-and-the-griffith-summit>

<https://blogs.griffith.edu.au/learning-futures/It-strategies-shine-at-the-griffith-microsoft-365-summit/>

Conclusion

The value of running semi-formal benchmarking events is ultimately seen in the worth placed on these by the participants, as seen in the above evaluations. It is not often in the sector that we have the opportunity to share practice at this level. The two events demonstrated that there is both a desire and willingness to share common practices and lessons learned with colleagues from other institutions. Although Griffith facilitated these events as part of their sector wide engagement, it is important that other institutions look to host similar activities in the future, as we are all in this together and the more we can share the pluses and minuses of our practices, the more we can improve practice and limit remaking mistakes. Here in lies the beauty of semi-formal benchmarking.

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