



Keynote: Going to University—Blended Strategies for Learning and Teaching in a Modern Tertiary Context

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Abstract

This think piece is a follow-up to a keynote delivered at the biennial DEANZ Conference, at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand, in April 2016. It explores the University of Waikato's Mixed Media Pathway. Dianne Forbes ponders her own experiences as a tertiary student, considers some of the changes and challenges facing universities today, and presents one response to these changes in the form of blended learning. The Bachelor of Teaching, Mixed Media Presentation—an initial teacher education degree at the University of Waikato—is used to illustrate the benefits and challenges of blended learning for students and lecturers. It is proposed that students based on campus can benefit from blended learning, just as geographically dispersed students can. Going to university can comprise active learning partnerships at a range of physical locations.

Keywords: online learning; distance education; flexible learning; teacher education

Introduction

I went to university as a school leaver in 1989. For me, “going to university” entailed physically attending campus most days. There I joined a hundred or so other students in a large theatre for a 50-minute lecture and note-taking session, followed by a small group tutorial to discuss ideas, readings, and assignments. Some years later, as a masters student, I went to university part time while working full-time as a school teacher. At that stage, for me, “going to university” meant driving to the inner city campus after school to attend a 3-hour weekly seminar. Later still, as a part-time doctoral student and full-time lecturer, university was my workplace—so “going to university” meant going to work, where I spent some of my time working on my thesis, and met with my supervisors on campus.

Although my experience of going to university was campus-based, I started to teach online in 2002, working with students for whom physically going to university was something that occurred just three times a year. The students in the Bachelor of Teaching, Mixed Media Presentation (MMP) at the University of Waikato, complete most of their study at home, online, and in base schools in their local areas.

Teaching online

Programmes such as MMP have been developed in response to changes in society, demographics, and student needs. Specifically, MMP was established in 1997 during a teacher shortage in rural primary schools. At that time, many principals considered that there were people in their school communities who would be ideal candidates for teacher education, but who were unable to leave their regions due to adult commitments. For many of these potential

teachers, the idea of “going to university” seemed out of the question, daunting, and an opportunity that had slipped by. When MMP became a reality, students were able to juggle their online study with parenting. By spending one day a week teaching in a local base school, they enjoyed a close connection with the profession, and were able to reconcile theory with practice. Partnerships with teachers in schools have always been central to teacher education and these field-based placements are increasingly recognised as relevant across disciplines. From the inception of MMP through to the present day, the students have also spent blocks of time on campus where they meet with peers, attend classes, and form important relationships that sustain them through times of isolation. Back home, in the regions where the students live, connectivity has improved significantly since the late 1990s, when dial-up internet was the bane of every student’s life. Although they could sign up for contracts that allowed 30 hours a month of internet between 5pm and 8am daily, the connections were limited in speed and efficiency. Students used their internet connections to email files to lecturers. Most other communication was via telephone, which was a key means of support for students at a distance. As well as talking with lecturers on the phone, students worked in study groups with peers in their local area to talk through their work on assignments.

Although technology is often applauded as a driver and the source of innovation, it was just one aspect of the blend. In my interviews with students from the class of 1997–1999, technology was mentioned only when it was an impediment to their learning (dial-up, waiting for pages to load, computer problems, and connectivity issues). These students were instead sustained by their own sense of purpose, along with relational connections in base schools, on campus, with peers, and with lecturers.

These days, we have moved on from emails and dial-up internet to make use of synchronous and asynchronous technologies. I start a typical week with a video-cast to foreshadow the week ahead, and to give oral feedback on recent events in class. I then work in the asynchronous discussion forum and may encourage students to skype or meet in appear.in.¹ All MMP students establish an eportfolio in their first year; this is then used for formative feedback and eventual summative submission. Increasingly, we are inviting students to use social media, with class hashtags and tweetchats, to connect with us and the wider professional community.

Of course, the mixed media experience is not without its challenges. For students, key challenges include lack of support from family and friends, and absent staff and weak feedback can create confusion. Managing time is a common struggle, as is balancing the demands of family, paid work, and the financial sacrifices needed to commit to fulltime study. Alongside the practical challenges there are the usual academic hurdles. For each barrier there is corresponding triumph when family, peers, school colleagues and university staff are responsive. Students who conquer the challenges feel an incredible sense of accomplishment and enhanced digital literacy due to the mode of study.

While the flexibility of MMP is a benefit for students, it is also a benefit for the teaching staff. Thanks to the collegial mentoring I have enjoyed, teaching online enables me to fit my research, service, administration, and family life into the blend. A significant challenge has been workload management, and ensuring that flexibility leads to productivity rather than procrastination or overworking. The relational connections that are formed with care and attention to student needs are a complex feature and a powerful benefit of this kind of work. As for the students, the pros and cons balance out when a skillful approach is applied to blended learning.

¹ Appear.in is a free video-conferencing app that enables synchronous face-to-face interactions between individuals and groups over distance without the need to log in or download software. See <https://appear.in>

Conclusion

While distance learning is an obvious solution for students who are geographically dispersed, there is still a widespread assumption that if students can be primarily campus-based, then physical attendance is ideal. However, I contend that the benefits of blended learning can be shared with students who are based on campus. For example, for one of my four classes next semester, I faced the prospect of teaching a weekly lecture, followed by repeated tutorials. I could readily identify with the timetable clashes and exhaustion of colleagues who teach predominantly face to face! In response, I'm reducing the on-campus hours for the class in favour of a flipped approach to blended learning. Students will prepare for a single weekly session on campus. This preparation includes time for asynchronous online discussion. This is not a matter of whether the students can study on campus, but rather how and where they learn best, and how an academic can balance the demands of quality teaching with other aspects of the job.

My key message in this think piece is that tertiary education is experiencing a time of change. Blended learning is one response to change. It ensures flexible and relevant offerings to diverse students, and can work in a variety of ways to suit the students, staff, and discipline. When the focus is on people as well as efficiencies, blended learning can be a flexible solution to the challenges faced by modern tertiary education. As we look to the future, the way we understand “going to university” will be less about the on-campus experience and more about active learning partnerships in a variety of physical locations.

Note: The video recording of Dianne's keynote speech given during the DEANZ2016 conference on 19th April 2016 is available at <http://bit.ly/2e8YFSo>

Biographical note

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