



Is Student Transition to Blended Learning as easy as we think (and what do they think)?

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This is about the students. In the move to 'flipped' or blended modes of delivery, universities are spending all of their energies focusing on course design and upskilling academics, and assuming that students will easily embrace the new methodologies that are integral to blended learning approaches. We make this assumption based on the belief that they are au fait with all things technology when that may not be true. What we are doing is radically changing what they are experiencing as learning delivery methods, compared to what they had expected. Through implementation of these new blended learning delivery models, we have fundamentally changed what they are expected to do as students. We do this without sufficient warning and support mechanisms for this radical new way of learning. We must engage the students in this discussion and really *LISTEN* to what they want and need. We must conduct robust research that will inform our course design and teaching practices, our student advising and support, and we must begin now.

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Introduction

As teaching and learning professionals scramble to provide skills to academics teaching in flipped and blended modes, it appears that few are actively helping the students understand the changes they need to make to effectively engage with learning in this new university environment. Blended/Hybrid/Flipped learning represents the most dramatic change to university teaching that has ever occurred. As we work towards removing the lecture as the main form of content delivery, students maintain ongoing expectations for 'traditional' university teaching and study. There is a real paradigm shift from what students have expected when applying for a university degree, and relatively little has been done to date to prepare them for engaging successfully with these new teaching and learning models.

Flipped delivery assumes that general content knowledge has been achieved by the student (commonly through viewing video clips or engaging in other online resources) prior to completion of authentic tasks in class. As these teaching strategies develop from their infancy, the quality of the online materials is in many cases less than optimal, and students are expected to learn from materials that do not replicate the same interactive quality or format as the existing lecture model. The increasing use of purposeful video or other activities designed to engage the student in the independent mastery of content is an essential part of the 'flip'. This represents a different way of learning and organisation of study that is not only unfamiliar to students' parents, siblings, and previous teachers, but also, frankly, to most of their university teachers who are implementing the new strategies.

There is a definitive shift from students as consumers of content to creators of their own knowledge through a shift to deeper learning approaches (Johnson, Adams Becker & Hall, 2015). These developments, especially the reduction in face-to-face teaching hours, place a greater emphasis on the student as curator of their own learning and assign them greater responsibility for maintaining sufficient involvement in their courses. Students will no longer have a timetable of hours of contact that directs their mastery of core course content. For the first time they have the responsibility and the opportunity to determine their own approaches to mastery of content and concepts. While this may on the surface appear to be a positive development, it must be acknowledged that students are being required to do this with little consideration for the impact the changes will have on their workload and their approaches to learning. The previously held belief that it was the responsibility of the university to ensure that students are being provided learning opportunities is now being, to a large extent, transferred to the individuals themselves.

How new teaching methods affect our students

Across Australia, universities are developing blended learning experiences and designing corresponding learning spaces that increasingly leverage the growing number of educational technologies available (Johnson, et al., 2015). This is in stark opposition to the traditional lecture model. These developments challenge the relevance of the traditional lecture format as the most effective model, and in fact, represent a *renaissance* of teaching and learning methods in the university setting. Adopting these approaches will necessitate fundamental changes to how most courses and especially assessments are designed and delivered. As the majority of universities attempt to facilitate these changes, attention is focussed on the redevelopment of courses, activities, and assessments and the re-training of teaching staff to allow for successful implementation of blended learning models. Much less attention is being given to supporting students through these changes.

The expectation that students will master content through online engagement/viewing videos prior to attending classes may, for many, look no different than the common traditional expectation that they read the chapter prior to the lecture – which many students assume is unnecessary as they expect and even demand that the content be taught during the lecture. If they approach their studies with these traditional expectations and habits, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for them to succeed in the flipped environment. Student learning support will need to be offered in virtual, asynchronous environments as well as the traditional face-to-face consultative meetings (Foggett, 2015). This must address not only standard learning development topics such as writing and study skills, but also instruction in technologies that students are being asked to utilise along with new forms of time management to address self-mastery of content. This shift in study requirements will be easier for some students than others.

As universities compete in the race to develop virtual and physical learning spaces that will facilitate the changes in pedagogy required to assure student success – specifically engaged, and often group activities – an assumption appears to be made that students will be naturally drawn to this form of learning. Because most of these new methods involve some form of learning technologies, there is an underlying belief that students will easily embrace the changes in study and learning habits. This has not been the case to date (Dalstrom & Bischel, 2014) with students preferring and expecting more traditional methods of course delivery. The increasing use of learning technologies will require students to radically change their methods of organising their study and general life as a student.

Although technology is commonly woven into most aspects of students' lives, students are not as adept at leveraging technology to succeed in their studies as may be assumed. Longitudinal data from past student studies shows us that most (but not all) students access a variety of technologies on a daily basis, with a division between learning technologies and technologies used for personal purposes. While they recognise the value of technology, students may still require guidance when using technology in meaningful and engaging ways for academic study (Gosper, Malfroy & McKenzie, 2013). Active provision of this support has been largely ignored in discussions and program development surrounding blended learning.

Students enrolling in what they assume are 'traditional' university programs will not have an expectation of multiple use of educational technologies or of self-directed learning. (Calderon, Ginsberg & Ciabocchi, 2015). Many will approach university with an understanding of study requirements that have been firmly established through high school, other institutions, and from parents, siblings, and friends. Most are not aware that they will need to develop a whole new skill set that allows them to be effective students when exposed to these changes to pedagogy. The major change they will need to adopt is a far greater requirement to independently manage their own learning processes.

It is important to distinguish between students faced with studying in a blended environment (which includes face-to-face learning), and those who have intentionally chosen to study online. Students enrolling in fully online courses would be expected to have some knowledge that their mode of study would be different than previous face-to-face experience. Online course information often indicates the need to study independently using technology and the course materials provided. Students discovering that they are enrolled in newly-designed blended courses often begin their studies assuming that they will be getting a traditional university education, not dissimilar to their high school

or other previous educational experiences and expectations.

Dalstrom and Bischel (2014) reported that after sufficient exposure and experience, many students do prefer blended learning environments, and their expectations are increasing for these hybrid online/face-to-face experiences. Critically, however, many still expect (and even embrace) the face-to-face lecture model. It must also be acknowledged that the predominance of video-produced lectures presented as a standard for many blended models is relatively low tech and low-engagement. It does not emulate the engaged experience of many mobile, social media and other platforms that students have come to expect in their daily lives. The assumption that students will embrace these new learning methods *because* of their technology components is arguable at best.

As these blended delivery models become increasingly popular universities are providing a plethora of programs to support academics in this style of teaching and course design. A broad variety of incentives and programming is provided to assure that teaching academics are redesigning their courses, as well as their teaching methods to address the requirements of the new models. Despite these efforts, one of the toughest things for our students is the skill deficit of many of their university teachers. Many of these people are using these strategies / technologies as learners themselves, with compulsion to change their teaching methods through university policy and strategy, and not necessarily through their own choice (Llamas, 2014). With students unfamiliar with these new learning methods, and course coordinators (often grudgingly) attempting to deliver courses in new ways we have set up a scenario that is tantamount to the blind leading the blind.

Call to Action

In order to maximise the effectiveness of the teaching approaches university communities must gather evidence that supports the continued use of these approaches. Learning analytics is now yielding critical information about students' engagement with their course materials and activities (Miles, 2015). This involves a form of learner profiling, a process of gathering and analysing large amounts of detail about individual student interactions. The goal is to build better pedagogies, empower students to take an active part in their learning, target at-risk student populations, and assess factors affecting student success. Despite this work there seems to be a paucity of input from the students themselves. *We must* engage students in our decisions surrounding provision of support for them – relating to both technical expertise and study strategies. Students with different backgrounds, experiences, circumstances and learning styles will necessarily require different support mechanisms to take advantage of new approaches to teaching. We are telling students what is best for their learning when we are all in our infancy in this new blended world. There is tremendous pressure on the instructor to design engaged pre-class activities that allow students to master the content independently. We need to engage the students through action research to determine which content mastery activities *actually* yield the best learning results. These empirical findings will allow us to convince our academics that all of the effort put into course redesign will support student learning in our new teaching spaces – physical and virtual. Engagement with student groups on a national level, as well as careful liaison with secondary schools will be required to prepare students for this entirely new way of university study (and, consequently, career preparation). We not only need to guide our students on *how* to use the technologies and learning resources available, but *when* and *why* specific tools would best assist them in achieving academic success. It is time to work carefully and closely with all students and listen to them regarding how they want to construct their learning! Considerable research is required to determine the optimal institutional and course-based supports required for students embarking on a completely different university journey than has previously existed.

This is a call to action to Australian universities and those around the world to partner with our students in empirical and action research to provide a solid basis for our assumptions about student learning needs. This will allow us to construct student support mechanisms that will prepare our students to embark on radically different learning journeys and do it successfully. This will provide the groundwork for course design and instruction practices for our generations of students to come. We are not there yet. We are not close. It's time to begin.

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