Designing for "Flexibility": Exploring the Complexities of Dual-Mode Teaching

Karin Barac
Griffith University, Australia

Lynda Davies
Griffith University, Australia

Lenka Boorer
Griffith University, Australia

The demand to offer students more flexibility in their university study options has seen a growth in multiple course offerings in different modes of learning such as on-campus, online or a mix of both (blended). In line with this demand for flexibility there has been a need for universities to streamline practices to meet shrinking budgets. This environment has facilitated the growth of dual-mode teaching where faculties attempt to teach online and on-campus cohorts together with variable results. The curriculum, staffing and student expectation demands of these different modes of delivery are often at odds and it is becoming more difficult to meet these demands while maintaining a high quality teaching and learning environment. We would like to share experiences and discuss with like-minded colleagues how to approach this particular design challenge in the hopes of developing some guidelines and practical examples that can inform us all.

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Introduction

Nationally and internationally universities are striving to attract and retain students through offering flexibility in study options as a response to the ever-increasing competitive environment. This idea of flexibility centers on the idea of study occurring at "any time, any place" allowing students to "balance" study with work and other life commitments. The increasing demand for flexibility in study options has seen a growth in online and blended learning offerings of courses (or units) within university programs. While this demand for flexibility initially presents as an issue of curriculum design, the reality is that it becomes a complex interplay between curriculum design, staffing, and administration systems to be successful. The current university climate of shrinking budgets, however, has meant schools look to rationalize offerings and workload allocations to balance the finances. One of the effects of rationalization has seen an increase in the merging of on-campus and online offerings taught by single teaching teams as a single cohort. Our university calls this dual-mode teaching. While we have developed a framework of course design (Barac, Davies, Duffy, Aitkin, & Lodge, 2013) that makes best use of evidence-based research to deliver courses that serve this new single cohort there has been significant dissent from the different sub-cohorts of students (domestic, international and online) to the dual-mode approach.

In the past, to offer the best learning experience to students in different modes required approaches that were often at odds. In this new world of learning, how do we move forward in designing courses that will serve the need for flexibility while also serving the expectations of both domestic and international students? Where do we find the balance between quality course delivery; equitable workload and staffing allocations; and meeting student expectations based on their personal learning needs and perceptions?

Problem

For the past two years we have been implementing dual-mode teaching in a considered design approach that makes the best use of evidence-based practice to ensure the quality of the course design serves on-campus and online students. This has required a balancing act between student and academic expectations of how these learning environments should operate.

First, we have found a dissonance between student expectations of their learning experience and their demand for flexibility. Domestic students demand flexibility but do not want to lose their timetabled lectures and tutorials. International students travel to another country to get an on-campus experience. In our postgraduate degrees especially, this on-campus, in-country experience is threatened by what they see as a privileging of independent study over daily face-to-face contact.

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These divergent student perceptions are problematic given that, in design terms, flexibility relies on a move to student-centred approaches that use technologies to facilitate successful learning. As blended learning designs (such as those using flipped classrooms) proliferate the success of these learning environments rely more and more on students to accept responsibility for their role in the learning environment. Recognising and fulfilling that personal responsibility is something with which many students seem to struggle. Research has also shown, unfortunately, that as course design moves towards a blended approach students equate less time on campus with less time on task (Vaughan, 2007).

Studies in student perceptions of online and blended learning environments have found that students still place a high value on face-to-face interactions with their teachers (Conole, De Laat, Dillon, & Darby, 2008; Russell, Malfroy, Gosper, & McKenzie, 2014). We have found that students struggle with the idea of contact with the teaching staff consisting of something other than the traditional face-to-face style. Consequently, many do not see online interactions with staff as "contact". This is particularly worrying as we move more blended with our on-campus offerings.

Second, for academics, the design process for dual mode teaching is challenging as the move to teaching online requires a fundamental shift in their ideas of teaching and learning. Many who are comfortable with the on-campus lecture-tutorial model struggle with how to design courses in both spaces that do not privilege one mode over the other and maintains an equitable learning experience. The difficulties staff encounter as they redesign their courses are exacerbated when course development and online teaching is under-recognised during workload allocation processes. This often occurs because faculty executives under-estimate the complexity of the task and how much time it takes to re-design pedagogy, curriculum progression, student interaction with their course sites, content, peers and teaching staff, and content resources. Contrary to popular expectations, as students experience these re-designed courses for the first time (and particularly early in the semester), their demands on the teaching team often exceed those experienced during a traditional course delivery. It takes time and effort to bring students successfully into the new culture of learning. We have seen that as students take more courses designed well for the online environment, many change their behavior accordingly, although there are those who still resist the new methods. If faculty executive do not understand and allow for these challenges, the inadequate workload allocation presents a danger to the quality of the over all course delivery and hence the student experience.

Sharing Session

In the Arts, Education and Law Group the learning and teaching support team developed a design process that makes academics preclude mode from their initial decisions about course design. Once the initial framework of content and learning activities had been decided then they were asked to make decisions on where, when, and how each cohort would interact with these. In this way, the course would be designed towards best practice student-centered approaches rather than the traditional ideas of face-to-face delivery. In this context we advocated that academics thought of the amount of time students needed to give their study per week remaining the same: that is, a 10CP course equates to 10 hours work by students. What changes is how students interact with teaching staff, peers and content for the 3 hours (e.g., including listening/watching recorded mini-lectures) and then work for a further 7 hours independently (and with peers if appropriate). This independent study includes doing readings, assessment preparation, learning activities etc.

We found in our initial course designs, however, that we did not adequately align incoming students' expectations of study in the course with how the course was to be taught. Despite instructional text and tips throughout the course site, many students did not make the shift in their thinking of what contact looks like in the new environment, nor did they actively understand that they were equal partners in the learning transaction. It is for this reason we are currently working on embedding info-graphics that will communicate this to the students in a way that our previous textual and teaching methods did not convey.

Discussion Points and Goals

We would like to get together with like-minded colleagues and have the opportunity to discuss the following questions: -

- How do you approach the design of courses that are taught both on-campus and online?
- Does your university allow students to 'dip' in and out between on-campus and online? How, is this achieved?
- How do you accommodate ideas of flexibility in programs with large (and/or significant) international student cohorts?
- What is the ideal contact time per week between teaching team and students in flexible environment? What do you define as contact?
- What workload allocation does your university provide academics for the design and teaching of online or blended courses? Should it be different?

The outcomes of this session will be to work up some general guidelines and examples of good practice that participants can take back to their individual contexts to inform their decisions around program and course design and staffing implications for online and dual-mode teaching.

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