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Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Fostering professional capacity for blended teaching and learning: A case study exploring the affordances of collaborative unit redesign

Audrey Statham, Brandi Fox, Alison Leedy

Deakin University

Blended learning (BL) in higher education (HE) has for decades been considered a transformative way for universities to reach a wider range of students, increasing equity and availability to meaningful learning experiences. However, there is little in the BL literature around teaching academics and instructional designers' experiences and perspectives on BL. This case study explores collaborative redesign through the reflections of a team comprising an academic Unit Chair, Learning Designer, and a Sessional Lecturer. It illustrates how a collaborative BL redesign process strengthened a unit that in 2022 had been deemed to be unsuccessful, and built educator capability through professional learning (PL). The result was a pedagogical and learning shift, which led to the unit's successful delivery for online and on campus students in 2023. The findings have implications for BL and insight into collaborative design team experiences offering value to the academic community at large and foregrounding the value of pursuing a 'ground-up' collaborative BL redesign model.

Keywords: Blended Learning, Blended Teaching and Learning, Learning Design, collaboration, collaborative inquiry, qualitative

Introduction

Studies on Blended Learning (BL) in higher education (HE) are numerous and often look at the individual attributes and affects that critically influence the implementation and uptake of BL (Bruggeman et al., 2021), perception towards BL (Anthony Jnr, 2022) and student experience of BL (Islam et al., 2022). However, there is a paucity of literature around lecturer/educator and learning designer perspectives and, more specifically, regarding experiences of collaboration of teaching academics and learning designers in designing and implementing BL (Tay et al., 2023). Investment in building capacity of staff to design learning experiences that integrate digital technology is now an imperative for current and future success for HE institutions (Bennett et al., 2022) as the BL model for course delivery is increasingly the norm, rather than the exception. Understanding practitioner perspectives on BL and on collaborative BL design is therefore important to inform professional learning (PL) for building digital capacity of university staff.

Put simply, BL involves face-to-face and online teaching and learning activities which might be synchronous or asynchronous (Moskal et al., 2013). While traditionally, students in BL units attend lectures on campus and face-to-face, but also use integrated technology (Anthony Jr et al., 2019), BL units now also include different cohorts of students, including those choosing to enrol in units wholly online. Different models of BL design in HE can be found in the literature. BL scholarship tends to focus on the teaching and learning methods employed by individuals within their units (academic-centred) (Brown, 2016), and fostering a community of inquiry (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Recently Tay et al. (2023) identified teaching academics and learning designers as two main stakeholders in BL and called for a new focus on the collaborative aspect of the learning design and teaching process, and how it is constantly (re)negotiated between them. BL design as collaboration between teaching academics and learning designers signals a significant departure from community of inquiry and academic-centred models (Burrell et al., 2015). By comparison, collaborative BL design is an inclusive approach centred on partnership, which recognises both academics and learning designers as integral to designing and implementing BL.

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In this paper we explore the process of collaboratively redesigning a first-year education unit through the perspectives of those who redesigned it, the Unit Chair, who is typically in charge of designing and managing the individual unit, the Sessional Lecturer/Tutor, who is employed on a casual, short-term contract typically to undertake the teaching and learning activities; and the Learning Designer, who typically works collaboratively with Unit Chairs in the design, delivery and support of units. The question guiding the study was: What are the affordances for staff collaboratively redesigning a unit for blended delivery?

Methods

Study context

The authors undertook this research as part of the process of redesigning a first-year education unit in the Bachelor of Arts, that prior to the pandemic was taught both online and on campus for several years, however with limited online materials and offerings. In 2022, the unit received unsatisfactory student evaluations from the online student cohort and was deemed to be unsuccessful. The Unit Chair (Author Two) and Sessional Lecturer (Author One) felt the online students were not getting an equitable learning experience to the students on campus. The Unit Chair requisitioned redesign hours (75 hours) to redesign the unit for BL before the 2023 delivery, with 20 of these hours given to the sessional lecturer who had taught the unit for many years prior in different iterations. With time and money allocated, the unit redesign began in late 2022.

The unit teaching staff undertook a collaborative approach to BL redesign that also included digital learning designers (including Author Three). This comprised two phases: redesigning the unit for BL and after the redesigned unit was completed, reflective research on the BL design process was undertaken by the authors through a collaborative enquiry approach. To our knowledge, this study is also the first to include a sessional academic's perspective on collaborating in the design and implementation of BL.

Collaborative approach to participatory research

Upon completion of the unit redesign and delivery, we undertook a collaborative reflective study on the redesign process and impact on the unit. Drawing on participatory research (Vaughn & Jacquez, 2020) and collaborative enquiry we formed a Professional Learning Community (Donohoo, 2013) and data was generated at three separate 45 minute, audio recorded and transcribed Zoom meetings. During the participant research meetings we shared our experiences, allowing for the opportunity to listen and reflect together, to collectively explore the affordances of redesigning a unit for BL and teaching. It was during our meetings that we were able to reflect holistically on how unit BL redesign happens in HE, which resulted in us thinking differently about blended learning, unit design and teaching and learning in HE.

Data analysis and findings

Transcripts of the participant research meetings were analysed thematically by the authors using QSR NVivo to identify core themes/codes (parent nodes hierarchical) and categorised these hierarchically. Together, we were able to draw conclusions both through and from the themes arising from our conversations, based on our collective and individual experiences. As we are the participants and the researchers, we are also able to validate that what has been interpreted from our data is accurate to what we have said limiting misinterpretation of the data. A range of affordances of redesigning the unit for BL were interpreted from the data. The three main affordances for staff being: opportunity (time and money) for collaboration, professional learning and a pedagogical shift with new understandings of student-centred BL and teaching.

Discussion

The opportunity to collaborate

As discussed previously the Unit Chair was allocated redevelopment hours including funding to pay the Sessional Lecturer to assist in the redesign of the unit. Time afforded for collaboration on the redesign relieved academic workload pressure, allowing for collegial 'conversations' that brought into focus the strengths of contrasting experiences from both academic and learning designer skill sets.

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I think that's about how we learn professionally along with our students and our practice as we go. And having the time [to reflect on this] is a huge one that I've learned from this, we really need the time to do the collaboration, to meet with design people and the experts. And that goes with that. You know the skills that I don't have, that I've been able to develop just in these conversations, one on one, whether it's with you, [Learning Designer], or [LD1], or [LD2], or whomever and go, 'Oh, yeah, okay, I can do this' is really empowering as well, and I think also having the time with you both and thinking about what we've done in this unit. And then seeing the student response as being so positive has been really fantastic. (Unit Chair)

Funding ensured the Sessional Lecturer was compensated for helping to redesign the unit offerings and had the opportunity to attend the meetings with learning designers, which is not usually the case.

A lot of times it's the casual staff delivering the learning activities or doing the designing [of teaching and learning activities], but not being compensated or not being given the access to the [learning design team]. (Unit Chair)

Professional learning

The project's success was embedded in the collaborative BL design approach of both academics and the digital learning designer working together. Through the opportunity to collaborate, knowledge exchange fostered PL.

I've been on a digital learning team so I'm very digitally focused with the visual appeal and navigation. So I think that having these conversations with both of you about what happens in the classroom and some of those hindrances and some things that are good. Wish I would have asked more of that in the beginning because it's really helpful to learn [how these digital tools are being utilised]. (Learning Designer)

Collegial 'conversations' were found to be more engaging and targeted than traditional transmissional PL.

As I'm having conversations with these learning designers I'm going like, 'Oh, that's a really good idea.' And I was getting more from that than sitting in the professional learning workshop about how to put Mentimeter into my lecture.' (Unit Chair)

Due to the nature of contracted employment, casualised teaching staff often lack access to PL and knowledge sharing about BL, including meetings with learning designers (Kahn et al. 2024). Author One on this paper discussed her experience as a long-term casualised staff member who was unaware of learning designers and their digital expertise:

If we do value giving structured learning to students through a redesign process because it enables more deeper thinking and more engagement with theoretical ideas, which is what [Unit Chair] said it is all about, the students, then professional learning is really important. Because otherwise long-term casuals will probably be positioned in an environment, a blended learning environment, that often positions students and tutors as more passive in their learning and teaching. (Sessional Lecturer)

Pedagogical Shift

A key affordance for staff is the shift in understanding the online students and the on-campus students as one cohort, rather than two. Thinking of the students as a 'unified public' afforded teaching staff 'a different kind of perspective', a new way of thinking and doing. This meant we designed assessments and teaching and learning activities for unit delivery that benefited the students in the unit as a whole cohort that includes on campus and off-campus online students, rather than as two separate cohorts.

I remember I think it was a meeting with you, [Learning Designer], where we were talking about the redesign where you were coming from a perspective that was very much you've got to treat all of the

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students as one kind of cohesive whole rather than the off-campus students just listening in. And I've noticed that. And I guess I didn't really understand it until yeah, I've gone through this process, which is interesting. (Sessional Lecturer)

This pedagogical shift meant that online students were not positioned as outsiders but as included in 'a cohesive whole.' It also saw teaching staff move towards more student-centred 'blended' teaching pedagogy for both online and on-campus learning environments.

So you're not just teaching seminars and lectures [as taught prior to BL redesign], but rather you're curating those materials through a different lens to an online kind of teaching space, which I think is critical to overcoming the divide that I previously had between off campus and on campus. You're thinking differently. And yeah, so that's why I think it's absolutely critical that we work in a collaborative team. Because, you know, we can teach for years without ever being pushed into a different kind of perspective, which I think is the blended learning perspective. And that's absolutely that sets you up approaching, teaching and tutoring quite differently. And even the design of the seminars changes. (Sessional Lecturer)

When exploring affordances there will always be limitations. A difficulty of hybrid/blended learning is that lack of synchronous lecture opportunities (such as in our case study) produces an unintended consequence of blended learning and hybrid learning modes in that students who are enrolled to attend on campus, often do not attend lectures and seminars, and instead only engage with the online materials and recordings. This makes the number of students engaging online difficult to determine. A key limitation for BL redesign is also that many university teachers are sessional academics who have little to no control over the design of curriculum they teach, lack access to PL opportunities and are not usually a part of the unit redesign process (Kahn et al. 2024). If it is only the Unit Chair that designs or redesigns the unit content, the overarching purpose of redesigning learning environments to be more student-centred can be 'lost in translation' for the sessional academic/s contracted to teach the redesigned unit. There can also be lack of continuity for learning designers who may not be informed that teaching in a redesigned unit will be carried out by casualised teaching staff. This points to another significant limitation for BL redesign. The current university structures staff in silos meaning that long-term and new sessional academics are often not aware of learning designers and vice versa. Siloing of staff has also meant there is a lack of transparency and knowledge about who does what regarding unit development and design. There is an assumption that the Unit Chair does this drawing on the expertise of the learning design team, which is not always evidenced in practice. Moreover, qualitative student data would have added further insight to our findings, and without student-voice and perspective we can only infer from our experience, along with publicly available quantitative student evaluative data that the unit was indeed a 'success'.

Conclusion

Collaborative enquiry into the BL redesign process was itself PL and therefore a key success as it resulted in a shift in perspective and pedagogy through collaboration. We argue the 'cohesive' perspective afforded for staff by collaborative BL redesign as PL constitutes an essential capacity for blended teaching and learning which university staff ought to be provided opportunities to develop. Overcoming a 'separating attitude' towards online and on campus students through acquiring an integrated perspective of BL students as 'a unified public' is vital for university staff and the students we teach, as well as for the success of HE institutions where increasingly BL is the norm for course delivery. Without such a capacity teaching staff are likely to position students enrolled remotely in HE blended units as outsiders 'listening in.'

Compared with traditional transmissive, passive models of PL, collaborative BL as PL was experienced as an 'empowering' dialogical process by academic and professional staff who did the unit redesign as it facilitated active learning about and from different skill sets and knowledge as part of a joint undertaking of improving the BL unit offerings. In contrast to what Tay et. al (2023) proposed that often tense stakeholder relationships prohibit collaboration in the learning design process, due to institutional emphasis on learning tools replacing

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or being offered in addition to traditional lectures and seminars, the collaborative BL model used allowed for the redesign to be a space of further reflection and engagement for both academics and learning designers. For sessional teaching staff who by virtue of their casual mode of employment and resulting lack of access to PL are usually not integrated into the academic community, this process is empowering in an additional sense as it provides opportunities to design BL curriculum, build digital competency (Bennett et al., 2022), to be included in a Professional Learning Community affording access to learning designers and PL and to be compensated. The benefits for students of the collaborative model of BL redesign as PL is supported by the unit student X data and publicly available evaluation data for the 2023 unit delivery, which found a significant increase in student engagement and overall satisfaction.

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