



‘As long as you use the template’: fostering creativity in a pedagogic model

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As the higher education landscape enters a new era of digital-first education, education designers are tasked with supporting the pedagogic work of educators to design learning experiences which connect students with disciplinary content, with each other and with their educator in the digital learning environment. This paper uses a collaborative autoethnographic approach to reflect upon the challenges experienced by two education designers implementing a pedagogic model to support blended and hybrid learning at scale. A key tension of this work is the perception that design templates diminish educators’ academic freedom and creativity by exerting institutional control over disciplinary experts. We argue that bringing teaching teams together in dialogic and disciplinary learning communities around our pedagogic model fosters creativity by providing space for educators to scaffold their own development, and ultimately, reconceptualise their content for new ways of teaching and learning.

Keywords: education design, academic freedom, pedagogic models, creativity, learning communities

Introduction

After decades of debate on, experimentation with, and challenges to traditional notions of knowledge and teaching, in 1998 the Boyer Commission called for the ‘radical reconstruction’ of higher education (Boyer Commission, 1998). The scholarly literature at that time broadly recognised that a student-focused approach to teaching results in deeper learning within a cultural and disciplinary context, but for the next twenty years, much of the teaching and learning occurring in universities continued to be grounded in a teacher-led paradigm (Brew, 2012). In 2015, Monash University, a large research-intensive university, prepared a bold vision for whole-of-institution education transformation to meet the demand for more student-centred, flexible and blended offerings. The University employed education designers (EDs) in all faculties to support educators as they embraced the digital environment. Enter the COVID-19 pandemic stay-at-home orders and travel restrictions in 2020: the shift online accelerated to meet students wherever and whenever they were able to study.

In this paper, two EDs from the Science and Arts faculties at Monash University reflect upon their experience of implementing an innovative pedagogic model at scale. Our model draws on a complex mix of learning theory, blended learning methodology and instructional design principles, and is supported by ‘just-in-time’ support resources, workshops, and showcases of educators’ good practice to inspire colleagues to innovate. Despite the policy mandates, the appetite for hybrid learning, and the available education support resources, uptake of our pedagogic model was uneven as educators’ reservations about the practice of digital-first education persisted (Henderson et al., 2022). This lack of faculty-wide adoption prompted us to reflect on our own practice. We realised that we were rushing the implementation of our pedagogic model. We recast our change management strategy as a learning design, recognising our educators as active participants in their own learning (Geertsema, 2016). We argue that bringing teaching teams together in dialogic and disciplinary learning communities around our pedagogic model fosters creativity by providing space for educators to scaffold their own development, and ultimately, reconceptualise their content for new ways of teaching and learning.

We use a collaborative autoethnographic approach to make sense of, and derive meaning from, our experience of influencing the practice of the educators. We began in 2015 as part of a small group of faculty-based EDs, gathering for an informal weekly catch up to share our stories of success and failure. Faculty-based education design was relatively new to Monash University and we were unsure of the best way to proceed. We examined our philosophies and processes for shifting the paradigm of teaching, and reflected on the institutional positioning and preconceptions of our roles. We devised a strategy to introduce a pedagogic practice that made

explicit student-centred learning. These ‘living-in-common’ experiences (Bazzul & Siry, 2019) were critical in the development of our identity as EDs as we navigated our way through an opaque system of traditional academia towards a clear and effective process of learning transformation. We have examined our dialogue over seven years in our roles to develop a narrative of our experiences that bring to the fore issues of power, influence, pedagogy, and entanglement with organisational structures. Our ongoing dialogue opens our experiences as a site of enquiry where we can critically reflect on our roles as agents of change. For the purposes of this paper, we examine how the dynamic of our relationship with educators informs the uptake of an aspect of our pedagogic model: the LMS template. We invited a range of academics to respond to questions about the experience of working within the template, and we share two of these examples below.¹

Our pedagogic model

Our pedagogic model is grounded in a programmatic approach to curriculum transformation. We work with educators to ‘map out’ their programs to demonstrate the contribution of each unit of study to the course learning outcomes, the University’s graduate attributes, and other relevant educational frameworks such as the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (French et al., 2014; Lawson et al., 2014). We encourage educators to embed transition pedagogy in their program design to enable successful student transition into and through first year, into later years and ultimately out into the world of professional practice (Kift, 2009; Kift et al., 2010). At the unit level, we meet with educators to explain good learning design principles, examine learning outcomes and their relationship to assessment and feedback loops, and introduce LMS templates to guide educators to structure their learning materials into a cohesive and logical learning pathway (Laurillard, 2012; Boud & Molloy, 2013; Biggs, 2007; Boud, 2007). We don’t do the work ‘for’ educators; we do it ‘with’ our educators, in a broader effort to support staff to build their capabilities and transform their education practice.

Our self-reflexive practice led us to explore and document our early successes and failures in implementing program- and faculty-wide LMS templates. Our aim, and the mandate from our faculty leadership, was to lead educators away from the use of the LMS as a repository for files, and towards best practice for active learning in the digital environment. Our LMS templates comprise two main elements: firstly, a navigation banner which organises LMS sites into prescribed sections; and secondly, subheadings within each of these sections, which guide educators to provide students with all necessary information and learning resources in the unit. These elements together create a context for consistent, purposeful and signposted learning pathways for students. Our support resources and workshops focus on a ‘digital first’ approach: intentional design for the digital learning environment placing the student learning experience at the centre, with face-to-face teaching elements added to extend and deepen student learning. Following the success of numerous implementations, (as described in Gleadow, et al., 2015; and Hook et al., 2018), we felt confident that this good practice would continue unabated.

“The ironic surrender”

Our first story illustrates the tensions in the implementation of new LMS templates. It was at the end of a one-on-one session between an ED and a new educator in a high-profile master’s program, who had been referred to the ED by the program director. The ED had spent the meeting explaining and demonstrating the LMS template to ensure the educator would design their unit content in line with good practice, and to be consistent with the other units in the program. It was all going very well, with the ED fielding the educator’s questions: ‘Can I do X?’ or ‘How would I do Y?’, until the ED said, ‘You can do anything you like, as long as you use the template.’ With a shrug the educator indicated their compliance. The ironic surrender was palpable.

That shrug gave the ED pause. The LMS template was core to the design of a pedagogically-sound, customised learning pathway, developed over hours devoted to sessions where the academics and the ED explored appropriate design models suitable for their learning and assessment materials; and wide-ranging discussions covering best practice in blended learning, the relevance of style guides, usability and accessibility guidelines, and the use of banners and icons to create a distinct ‘look and feel’ for the program. This groundwork addressed feedback from students that their online learning space was messy and inconsistent, and promoted a delivery approach that would work across multiple units with a teaching team. How could the educator not see that the easy-to-use template would save them time thinking about how to lay out their learning materials, so they could instead spend their time ‘imagining’ what they could do with their content? We asked ourselves, does our pedagogic framework facilitate the creative freedom of educators to teach their disciplinary content, or are we “part of a machinery suppressing them”? (Roxa & Martensson, 2017, p. 95).

¹ This research has ethics approval from Monash University.

Are we doing the devil's work?

In *Creativity Crisis* (2018), Robert Nelson argues that “constructive alignment harms creativity” (p. 242). Nelson defines creativity as “a disposition toward the productive use of the imagination”, filling the space between knowing and not knowing (p. 27). Creativity and imagination are collaborators in the learning journey; a journey that propels the learner from the known to the unknown and out the other side, untethered by a culture of compliance. Our challenge is to create opportunities for our educators, who are our learners in this process, to incorporate creativity and imagination into the development of their course materials. We want educators to use the LMS template to clear the way for their innovative practice, rather than trapping them in a “web of consistency” (Biggs, 2007, as quoted in Roxa & Martensson, 2017, p. 102).

Core to academic identity is intellectual freedom (Akerlind, 2005). Our educators are disciplinary experts, and some fear that ‘working to a template’ is a challenge to their control over their content. Others proclaim that using the LMS template ‘dumbs down the curriculum’. Further, our positions as EDs afford us power across a number of domains: we are education experts; we realise the institutional education strategy through our work; and our faculties have mandated the use of our LMS templates. As Roxa and Martensson argue, we must recognise that we “do have power to do things to people” (2017, p. 102). We argue that our pedagogic model does not stifle creativity, instead we provide a framework where we encourage educators to harness their disciplinary expertise to create innovative learning experiences for their students.

Educators as learners

Our initial change management strategy was to build relationships, work with early adopters, and showcase exemplars of good practice, all within the university vision and strategy. We now reflect on what we know makes for good learning and apply this theory, knowledge and practical experience to build the capacity of our educators. We bring teaching teams together in collegial and dialogic ‘learning communities’ that reinforce their identity as educators and experts in their fields; and foster the creative and imaginative development of learning opportunities within a shared pedagogic model. These learning communities are meaningful connection points where educators have the opportunity to share their experiences and stories and “to explore [their] concerns collectively, drawing on [their] experiences as educators” (Fox, et al, 2021, p.2079). We acknowledge the passion, fear and pride in teaching (Gibbs, 2013). We encourage our educators to consider the ways in which they can use digital technologies to create ‘expansive’, ‘expressive’ and ‘empowering’ learning experiences where students actively produce knowledge (Henderson et al., 2017).

Our second story centres on an educator’s reflection on their experience of working with EDs and using our LMS template. This educator is the program lead of a fast-growing, new specialist undergraduate degree program which welcomes over 300 new students into its first-year units each semester, from a range of cultural backgrounds, with 75% international enrolments from 22 countries, and with many students studying remotely. They say: ‘As the course coordinator, it was really important for me to really invite all 300 students to feel welcomed and to feel that our unit is like home for them’ (Hook & Macfarlan, 2022). At first, the educator was sceptical about how the EDs could help them to create a culture of communication in the digital learning environment: ‘I had my serious doubts about how ‘outsiders’ from my own discipline could help me teach. How could the EDs really help me to make my classrooms more engaging via the LMS?’ (Hook & Macfarlan, 2022).

Through a number of iterations, the educator and their teaching team talked through practical ideas with the EDs, thinking about different ways to create a culture of communication. Together they harnessed the LMS template to create a sense of intellectual and emotional belonging for the students. The onset of the pandemic accelerated the need for the educator to design cognitive, social and educator presences into the digital environment where students could engage with the content, with each other, and with their educator (Swan et al., 2009). The educator recognised that these ‘presences’ must be intentionally designed, and not merely assumed as they often are in the physical classroom. They employed the ‘pre-in-post- class’ sections of the LMS weekly page templates to offer layers of engagement to students. The pre-class, asynchronous lesson includes recorded ‘mini-lectures’ where the lead educator and guest lecturers introduce the key themes and readings for the week, integrated with curated content and interactive ‘check your learning’ questions, finishing with an ice-breaker activity. Student engagement data shows that 90% of students complete these lessons before attending tutorials. This preparation lays the ground for a series of creative in-class activities, such as small group work to collate a photo-collage sharing initial thoughts on the topic. The small group work then extends to focussed discussions on the readings and lecture material drawing on the intercultural differences across the cohort, and finally, doing the hard work and thinking for assessment preparation. In the post-class space, the lead educator uploads a ‘video-letter’ at the end of each week, reflecting on the learning that has occurred during the week,

connecting the learning to the unit learning outcomes, sharing some student work and offering feedback, and preparing students for learning in the following week. The educator was ‘completely shocked to find how much students were accessing the material in the LMS, especially the video-letter’ (Hook & Macfarlan, 2022). In their feedback on the use of the LMS template, the lead educator reported that:

The template provides me with the pedagogical framework to create a welcoming and intellectual space for my students. I could build this using the different layers of the template and it helped us to create activities in a very open and creative manner. We used the activities to share how we are, what we have been doing and thinking. And some students really open up, and open the doors for the learning. In that way it gave the students a solid academic reach. The video-letter was also a really important layer. It created a culture of identity, emotional belonging, safety and intellectual curiosity. The students stepped off from there to do incredible, intellectual, hard work. Their final assignments were absolutely incredible. It worked beautifully...It was my first time working with my group of tutors, and we came together in this communicative space, it was a privilege to be together. My tutors are young, vibrant, exciting and passionate teachers. I invited them into a conversation to think about activities before and during tutorials. We were able to create levels of trust; we became friends who really cared for each other and for our students. And to the end, we just couldn't say goodbye to each other, we basically had a couple of end-of-semester events with the students and with each other. (Hook & Macfarlan, 2022)

This logical and coherent unit design did not occur in isolation, but in the context of the entire program. Each unit in the program exemplifies a blended learning design where “the digital is not a special or separate domain from embodied, co-present spaces that we inhabit day to day – instead, the two kinds of spaces are inextricably linked with each other” (Bayne & Jandrić, 2017, pp. 14-15). The lead educator has gradually built towards using the full functionality of the LMS as an active learning space. Although they find teaching in the digital space ‘difficult’, they are now more thoughtful about it, integrating educational technologies to implement their teaching philosophy, regardless of the mode of instruction. They remain committed to a Socratic method of teaching, incorporating multiple learning modalities for students to work together toward answers: ‘I celebrate students when they build on each other’s ideas rather than look to me for answers’ (Hook & Macfarlan, 2022). The program now serves as an exemplar in the faculty, and the educator is recognised for their education practice across the university and beyond.

Conclusion

As Nelson argues, “contemporary syllabus design does not favour creativity or imagination—and...it is worth contemplating how creativity and imagination can be cultivated within constructivist parameters” (2018, p. xiii). In our ED informal weekly catch ups, we have excruciated over this question, wondering aloud and sharing our stories of success and failure in implementing institutionalised frameworks for teaching and learning. Is it possible that we are doing the devil’s work and shoe-horning the educators into borders within which they must design and develop?

The authors of this paper have found that our pedagogic model provides a framework where educators, as discipline experts, can come together as learning communities to reconceptualise their content for new modes of teaching and learning. Educators use our LMS templates not just for quality assurance, but to create dynamic, individual and bespoke online learning spaces for their students. Further, those educators who embraced the learning process were cognitively prepared for the challenges of the sudden shift to online learning in 2020. Some educators, such as the one from our second story, reported an emotional teaching experience that they will always remember. They shared their anxieties about their changing identity as educators in the online learning environment, they made space for creative and imaginative risk-taking with online learning technologies and approaches, and have been propelled as learners from the known to the unknown and out the other side.

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