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# **“LEARNING ON THE MOVE: RECONCILING THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS AND ACADEMICS IN THE FAST LANE OF TERTIARY EDUCATION IN 2006”**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper argues that using a blended approach to learning design can deliver best practice in online and face-to-face methods. The paper considers how a blended model can also provide a way of reconciling the needs and interests of students and academics in the fast-paced environment of contemporary tertiary education. A particular focus of the paper is on considering how a blended approach to learning design can achieve effective and efficient learning outcomes for students, whilst also providing efficiencies to academics that respond to workload imperatives.*

## **Keywords**

*Blended learning design, online, face-to-face, conversational framework, effective and efficient learning, academic workload*

## **Introduction**

In the fast-lane of tertiary education in 2006, academics are increasingly having to develop ways of achieving effective learning outcomes for their students whilst also offering learning environments that make efficient student learning possible. In addition to ensuring that students' contemporary learning needs are met, academics must also ensure that their teaching practices are reconciled with their own professional needs and interests. That is, as academics we must teach effectively and efficiently if we are also to achieve the high levels of performance that are expected of us in the research and service components of our workloads, an imperative that has become even more pressing in recent times with the imminent imposition of the Research Quality Framework (RQF) on the Australian sector. This is no small endeavour.

This paper explores how academics can exploit the learning opportunities offered by e-learning and computer-based technologies to move *away from* inefficient and ineffective traditional classroom-based approaches of transmission learning and teaching *towards* creating greater flexibility and enhanced depth of learning using blended delivery models (that is, models that blend face-to-face and online methods). In particular, we discuss a blended model of delivery practised in Queensland University of Technology (QUT)'s Faculty of Law over the last 3 years.

## **A blended learning and teaching model in the QUT context**

At QUT, as in many Australian tertiary institutions, there has been an increasing trend toward embracing e-learning opportunities (DEST, 2002). QUT, for example, states in its 2004 *Blueprint* a commitment to increase use of information and communication technology to “transform our teaching and learning in ways which engage and challenge students, and which enable different

learning environments, on-campus and off-campus, to be used in ways which are complementary and mutually reinforcing” (QUT, 2004, 4). QUT’s 2003 online teaching review also recommended that the institution “develop a whole of learning approach to the integration of online with on campus” and create strategies for evaluating “student learning outcomes from their whole learning experience (including online pedagogy)” (QUT, 2003). In the context of these institutional aspirations, blended delivery approaches operationalise exhortations to “structure learning environments that take into account conditions of learning” and to “promote learners’ self-responsibility in learning by providing balance between structure and freedom” (QUT, 2004a, 5).

The focus of this paper is a blended delivery model that was developed, trialled and refined through an action research project in QUT’s Faculty of Law (Field, 2004 and 2005). This model was significantly influenced by QUT’s institutional imperatives, mentioned above, together with a Faculty teaching delivery review in 2003 and significant student input into the model’s learning design. Arguably, the model has now been established as an effective and efficient teaching method, at least at the undergraduate level. It was last practised in Semester One 2006 in an elective unit in the Faculty’s *Bachelor of Justice*, JSB932 – *Alternative Justice Processes*, with an enrolment of approximately 50 students. That unit achieved an overall student rating of 4.6 out of a possible 5. The development of the model has spanned three years: it was also practised in the second year elective JSB 252 – *Citizenship and Justice* (enrolment of approximately 70), and in a first year core second semester unit, JSB137 – (enrolment of approximately 160).

The model involves four key elements: The first critical element is the theoretical foundation of Laurillard’s conversational framework (Laurillard, 2002). The other elements include, face-to-face action learning lectorials, online discussion, and a foundational study guide workbook. Laurillard’s theoretical framework upholds, and is reflected in, the three other elements. Before considering how this model creates opportunities for effective and efficient learning and teaching – that serve the needs and interests of both students and academics – we briefly consider these four critical elements.

### **A model for blended learning and teaching: four key elements**

The focus of Laurillard’s ‘conversational framework’ is on situating “learning as a relationship between the learner and the world, mediated by the teacher” (Laurillard, 2002, 86), and creating enhanced opportunities for learning through exploiting conversation that is “discursive, adaptive, interactive and reflective” (Laurillard, 2002, 86-89). The idea of constructing an approach to learning based on the concept of conversation was first formalized by Pask in *Conversation Theory* (Pask, 1976), and Laurillard is not the only educational theorist who has embraced and developed the notion (Laurillard, 2002, 87). What makes Laurillard’s development of the framework critical to the blended model discussed here is the emphasis that it provides on the use of computer-related technologies as part of the conversational technique.

In the face-to-face aspect of the model, the conversational experience involves dialogic interaction on varied levels – the learning facilitator (lecturer) converses with the students, the students converse with the learning facilitator and with each other, and the students develop internal conversations in the classroom (and outside of it) in their own reflections. Conversations in the classroom are structured using, for example, large group questioning, small group discussion, ‘buzz groups’, one to one conversations, and individual thinking time (Cannon and Newble, 2000, 72-74). In the online context, through the use of structured asynchronous discussion fora, conversation is manifested in a written form. These discussions allow collaborative, yet individually timed, contributions that permit students “time to be reflective and provide well-thought-out answers” (Bender, 2003, 65). In both the face-to-face and online environments the focus of, and subject for, conversations are derived from the study guide workbook. These workbooks are also written in a plain English, conversational style, consistent with the framework.

The second element of the model is the face-to-face component that takes place in the first two weeks of the semester, and then every alternate week. The focus of the face-to-face sessions is on an active learning environment (Gibbs, 1982; Hativa, 2000), rather than on content delivery (which is achieved through the study guide workbook). The active learning approach is based on a rejection of large group expository lectures because they fail to encourage active participation and

engagement, and therefore fail to facilitate deep level learning for students (Ramsden, 1992, 101). The approach is also a direct response to the sectoral imperative to reconceptualise our approach to teaching for learning in the face-to-face classroom now that content can be transmitted much more effectively online: it ensures that face-to-face time adds value to student learning (Kift, 2004).

Hence, the face-to-face workshops use activity, and in particular, conversational activity, to engage students (Dunkin, 1983, 75; Cannon, 1988, 3), and to build a strong, trusting, enthusiastic learning environment. For example, students are variously involved in resolving individual thinking points, in problem-solving with a neighbour, and in debating issues in larger groups. Videos are shown and then discussed and unpacked in small groups, or as a large group. Powerpoint documents provide a visual focus and summary for spoken interaction. Collective class notes and conversation summaries are constructed on the large screen – often with a volunteer student as note-taker. These notes are later added to the unit’s website. Roving microphones are used to ensure all students have a chance to speak, be heard clearly and to interact, both with the learning facilitator and with each other. Put simply, there is a clear purpose for the students and learning facilitators to meet face-to-face, which the traditional expository model can no longer purport to sustain now that online delivery routinely supplements content.

Two factors are critical to the success of the face-to-face workshops: first, the absence of any imperative to focus on information provision, which is achieved via the written study guide workbook; and second, the enthusiastic engagement of the learning facilitator. In terms of the latter, the learning facilitator must be able to communicate effectively with students (Salmon, 2000, 41), model effective approaches to learning (Bender, 2003, 54), facilitate and encourage motivation (Wlodkowski, 1999; Donald, 1999, 27; Keller, 1987), personalise the learning experience (Bender, 2003, 11, 31), and be able to give instantaneous, appropriate formative feedback (Bender, 2003, 31). Clearly, this cannot be achieved without a commitment to a student-centred approach that prioritises the encouragement and stimulation of active learning for students.

The third element of the model is the use of asynchronous online discussions that take the place of face-to-face sessions in alternate weeks. Currently, asynchronous discussion is the most commonly used format for online discussion (Holmes, 2004, 2); indeed, Hisham *et al* comment that it is “not if, but how asynchronous e-learning systems should be used” (2004, 6). Asynchronous discussion “involves a hybrid of familiar forms of communication” so that “the discursive style of the typical participant lies somewhere between the formality of the written word and the informality of the spoken” (Salmon, 2000, 18). This approach to online discussion was incorporated into the design of the model because it reflects a conversational style while retaining some of the rigour of written expression; and further because it allows many students to log on and contribute at the same time (Salmon, 2000, 18), and at an hour and pace that suits their own learning style and life context. Asynchronous online discussions therefore make it possible to have orderly large group scholarly conversations online, that remain sensitive to individual student needs (Preece, 2000).

In the online component of the model, conversational activity remains at the core of achieving student engagement and effective learning. The discussions are assessed, and heavily weighted relative to the overall scheme of assessment (30%), to reflect and to communicate to students, the value of the discussions as a learning activity. The process of assessment design is a collaborative, negotiated process with the students. And, as with the face-to-face element of the model, the active engagement and presence of the learning facilitator is again critical in the online environment. Slack *et al* (2003) have found that online discussion can facilitate deep learning but only in circumstances of effective instructor facilitation and support. Importantly also, the success of online discussions can be linked to the way in which they are integrated with the face-to-face and study guide workbook components of the model.

The final element, the study guide workbook, is effectively the anchor for the model. It follows a weekly, structured approach to comprehensively detailing unit content in a relatively informal, (again) conversational written style. As noted above, the workbook fulfils the ‘information provision’ aspect of the unit’s delivery by ensuring that students have in a written, comprehensible format, all the core unit content, key summaries, readings, thinking points, reflective activities and discussion questions. The workbook is designed to permit the unit’s active learning opportunities

(both face-to-face and online) to focus on developing student understanding of content and concepts. Evidence of this learning resource's value can be found in the fact that it has been used as a best-practice model in other Faculty units, even where the blended approach is not in use.

Before moving on to consider how this model can achieve effective and efficient outcomes for both students and academics, it should be noted that the decision to implement a model such as this must be carefully taken. Notwithstanding that "technology-supported learning environments offer many opportunities for both teachers and learners" (Oliver, 2000, 157), these models are clearly not suitable for all class types, student cohorts or subject domains. The judgment to implement the model in the units noted in this paper was made on the basis of Wells and Field's (2003) four key indicators: the *nature of the student body*; the *level of study*; the *nature of the unit material*; and the *nature of assessment* required to meet unit and course objectives. A blended model will not be successfully implemented simply because it is *deemed* an appropriate approach, however tempting that might be for an academic manager given the model's resource effectiveness. It is precisely because blended models remain relatively novel that significant attention is required both to ensuring the engaged commitment of teachers to the learning facilitation involved and to 'bringing the students on board' through explicit communication and thorough explanation of the benefits of this approach for their learning; including what it involves and its rationale and a level of negotiation with students about matters such as assessment design. By being explicit, a collective understanding of the model's learning objectives can be achieved (Campbell-Gibson, 2000, 157), along with high levels of student 'buy-in' to the approach.

## **Reconciling academic and student needs by achieving effective and efficient learning and teaching: How does the model achieve this?**

As learning facilitators in the fast-paced environment of contemporary tertiary education, we cannot, by any means, guarantee to students that they will learn effectively, however efficient the means we deploy. To make such guarantees removes responsibility from the students for their own learning, and flies in the face of principles that encourage independent learning. But we can say to students that our pedagogical expertise allows us to create learning environments for them in which effective and efficient learning *is possible* (Laurillard, 2002, 11; Ramsden, 1992, 5). The following two sections discuss how the model proposed can achieve effective and efficient learning and teaching outcomes for students and academics alike, in efforts to alleviate and to reconcile the diverse contemporary needs and interests both face. This discussion draws from other writing about this model, supported by a 2005QUT Teaching Fellowship program, that resulted, for example, in the identification of "certain favourable conditions" (Ramsden, 1992, 116) for its effective and efficient implementation (Field, 2005(a) and (b)).

### **Achieving effective learning**

Academics who wish to make effective learning possible for students focus on creating learning environments and designing assessment tasks that promote predominantly deep learning outcomes and discourage superficial approaches (Ramsden, 1992, 86). To be successful, we must be student-centred and outcomes-focused in the methods we employ and encourage students to engage at high cognitive levels with unit content and concepts. We must adopt methods that motivate students to capitalise on the learning opportunities created for them; for example, by harnessing community and interactive forces to promote engagement, discussion and participation (Dunkin, 1983, 75; Cannon, 1988, 3; Wlodkowski, 1999, 8; Bender, 2003, 65). And we must, at least to some extent, take account of students' different learning styles and preferences and the contemporary reality of their current patterns of learning engagement (James, 2002, 81).

Concerns about whether traditional face-to-face teaching methods, such as lecturing, can create opportunities for effective learning in this way are well documented (for example, Beard, 1976, 100; Gibbs, 1982; Cannon, 1988, 3; Kraft, 1990; Bridgstock, 1995, 1; Hativa, 2000, 75; Laurillard, 2002, 92). It must also be acknowledged that parallel concerns exist in relation to certain online methods (Barbera, 2004; Oliver, 2004, 1), especially where online elements are not integrated into a holistic vision of learning design, but rather have been merely "bolted-on" to existing face-to-face course delivery (Kift, 2004). To a large extent it was a recognition of these concerns, and a desire to actively disengage with ineffective and inefficient approaches, that lead to this model's

development. Ineffective teaching is neither professionally satisfying nor rewarding. Expository lectures are just as dull for the lecturer as they are for the disengaged audience. Marking assessment that regurgitates superficial levels of understanding is a dispiriting, depressing task.

The model results, then, from reactive research, experimentation and professional reflection in pursuit of a learning environment in which deep, effective, yet efficient, learning can be made truly possible for students in the contemporary reality of 2006 higher education. Yet the model not only meets the effective learning needs of students; it also addresses the needs of academics to be professionally rewarded and fulfilled by the teaching component of their academic workload, while also being alive to possibilities for harnessing the synergies that exist between the teaching, research and service workload aspects (for example, through engagement with the scholarship of teaching (Kift, 2003) and the service aspect of unit coordination and policy enhancement). To achieve these things, the model promotes an approach that highlights three key factors: first, active learning through conversation; second, engaging with students in the design of their learning conditions; and third, providing efficient ways to learn effectively through flexibility.

### **Active learning through conversation**

The first of Ramsden's principles of effective teaching exhorts securing student interest (including making student learning of unit material a "pleasure") and the provision of "skilled explanation" (Ramsden, 1992, 96). In this model, student interest and pleasurable learning are achieved by ensuring active learning takes place via Laurillard's conversational framework across the three other components of the model. This approach to active learning through conversation is supported by the 'skilled explanation' of unit content which occurs via the study guide workbook; students are thereby free to engage with exploration and understanding of unit content in their conversational activity rather than mechanistically focusing on passive listening and/or frantic note-taking. The learning environment created via this model also fits with Ramsden's fifth principle, which relates to encouraging independence, control and active engagement: through the discursive, active and collaborative learning facilitated by the model, students are assisted to achieve understanding and effective learning outcomes (Ramsden, 1992, 100). In both the face-to-face workshops and the online discussion environment, the anchoring foundation of Laurillard's conversational framework means that learning becomes "lively, dynamic, engaging and full of life" (Cannon and Newble, 2000, 71). Learning in such an environment can be more effective because it is neither pressured nor intimidating (Hativa, 2000); although, clearly, such an environment is much more demanding of the learning facilitator's energy and skills of engagement than, for example, traditional expository lecturing.

### **Engaging with students in the design of their learning conditions**

Essential to achieving effective learning through this model is a high level of engagement with students about the design of their learning conditions. This requires explicit communication and collaboration with students about both the learning method in the model (its pedagogical justifications and student-centred nature) and critical aspects of the learning and assessment design. Specifically, once students have an understanding of the model and how it is practised, and once any concerns or queries are addressed, they are invited to contribute, for example, to designing how the online component of the model will work. Collaborative learning design facilitates students' connection to the unit's learning aims and objectives, and creates an environment in which unit content, learning tasks and assessment items can have a clear sense of fit and purpose (Biggs, 1999).

Collaborative learning design also sits well with Ramsden's second principle of effective teaching in universities which involves demonstrating concern and respect for students and student learning (Ramsden, 1992, 97). This principle is connected with another which requires that students are given clear goals and intellectual challenge if effective teaching is to occur. As Ramsden notes, it is important that "control over learning should reside both with the teacher and with the student" (Ramsden, 1992, 100). In this model, an effective learning environment is created through respecting students and providing them with an element of control over how the learning environment can be crafted to best cater for their individual and collective learning needs. So it is that a critical element of student collaboration in this model involves student input into assessment design. This connects respect for students with Ramsden's third principle of effective teaching,

namely, to provide appropriate assessment and feedback (1992, 198). In this model, assessment was equally weighted across three tasks (two take-home exams and assessment of the online discussions – all designed collaboratively with the students). The marking criteria were discussed and negotiated with students (and published on the online site), and feedback was given via criteria referenced feedback sheets and *powerpoint* presentations in class and online. Assessment approaches adopted in the model aimed to facilitate students' appreciation of the relevance of assessment to their effective learning, to respect student choice and perspective in designing aspects of the assessment process (Anderson *et al*, 1996, 10-12), and to make it clear to students how their performance in assessment could be improved in the future.

The collaborative element of the model also evidences achievement of Ramsden's final principle of effective teaching – ensuring that teachers learn from students. As Ramsden (1992, 102) comments “good teaching is open to change: it involves constantly trying to find out what the effects of instruction are on learning, and modifying that instruction in the light of the evidence collected”. Achieving effective learning via a blended model such as this requires a commitment to consistent evaluation and closing the feedback loop (Kift and Nulty, 2002). In this way the model is informed by, and responsive to, student needs, is based on students' real experiences of learning and again is respectful of their perspective. The process of refining and improving the model remains ongoing: its specific format for each new semester will continue to respond to each new cohort of students, their needs and contexts, as is appropriate in the dynamic tertiary sector.

### **Flexible learning achieves effective learning**

Contemporary students, especially the dot.com generation or millennial students (Hartman, Moskai & Dziuban, 2005), increasingly require and expect flexibility in the conditions and technology-alignment of their learning environments to allow for efficient study. Time constraints imposed by the struggle of balancing study, family, work commitments, and social obligations (Schrum & Hong, 2002), mean that flexible approaches to learning, such as the model here discussed, can assist students to learn efficiently within the context of their complex life matrices. Students who want choice – to some extent at least – about when, where and how they will learn, assume that tertiary institutions will keep pace with their needs and expectations. In our view, teaching approaches that present learning environments limited to on-campus classes will restrict their appeal and relevance to potential students because of the static nature of the time and place in which they make learning possible.

Alternatively, models such as this that integrate significant elements of flexible learning, through the online provision of 'own pace' learning and assessment and by unit content delivery via a study guide workbook, provide significant efficiency benefits to students by making learning possible “24x7” (Bender, 2003, 65; Salmon, 2000, 17). The concept of efficiency is not limited, however, to the issue of time flexibility: for example, efficient learning for students can also flow from clear and explicit communication about expectations in terms of learning objectives, outcomes and goals, and how these relate to assessment. Further, for the many students who increasingly approach their learning from a strategic, assessment-driven perspective, ensuring that assessment tasks are designed in aid of learning, as core learning tools central to students' learning outcomes, is critical to making efficient learning possible. For us, the link between effective and efficient learning is clear and compelling: if academics create efficient, responsive learning environments for students, they will inevitably assist their students to learn more effectively.

### **An academic perspective on efficient learning and teaching**

Most of this paper has been concerned with how adopting a blended model can achieve effective and efficient student learning outcomes, which may also consequentially address certain workplace needs of academics, such as being professionally fulfilled and deriving a sense of satisfaction from achieving positive student learning outcomes in their teaching. However, there are additional needs and interests that can also be served by creating efficient learning environments; specifically through harnessing the synergies that exist between the teaching, research and service components of the academic workload.

For academics in 2006, the ideal of efficient teaching practice has a critical time element: we simply do not have time to teach ineffectively or inefficiently. The 21<sup>st</sup> century academic has daily

teaching, learning, assessment and related administration loads that occupy increasingly larger amounts of our academic time. As a consequence, many have extreme difficulty making the intellectual time and space to conduct traditional, let alone collaborative, research as promotion and performance planning obligations demand they do. This daily teaching-research struggle is usually exacerbated in the ranks of junior academics, especially when these academics shoulder an inequitable amount of core undergraduate teaching and are also frequently given on-going curriculum development responsibilities.

At a simplistic level then it is clear that the more efficiently we teach, the more time we will have to perform at higher levels in the research and service components of our workloads. The model proposed is predicated on aspects of learning design that are time-consuming, at least in their early stages. However, as with many things, smart front-ending of processes – putting resourcing and effort into, for example, the preparation of the study guide workbook – will conserve effort and resourcing at later stages of the semester and facilitates the efficiency of the entire model. For example, in the early weeks of the model's implementation, the online component requires monitoring and facilitation. However, by the second or third online week, the focus on student peer interaction and conversation reduces the level of facilitator input required. In fact, students appear to flourish in the environment when given the freedom to do so. While marking of the online contributions is a time-consuming task, again efficiencies are possible here through, for example, use of peer assessment, or asking students to collate and present their best contributions, or to provide a summary or reflective journal of those contributions. Once the necessary ground work has been effectively embedded in the early weeks, the model achieves some significant time efficiencies from about week four on, that can allow academics to pursue research and service endeavours while flexible and yet effective learning continues smoothly in the unit.

However at a deeper level, it is also possible to leverage the teaching activity proposed by this model to produce desirable and significant research and service outputs. For example, if the engaged learning facilitator in this model approaches their teaching role in a similar way to that in which a researcher approaches traditional research – with particular emphasis on making the [experimental teaching] process transparent and publicly available for critique and comment after rigorous evaluation and analysis – then, with limited additional effort, it is strategic and efficient for the academic to publish on the consequent scholarship of teaching and to write quality academic disseminations around this core curriculum development in their discipline areas (Kift, 2003). This research might also occur collaboratively with extra-faculty and divisional colleagues. In the service domain, by way of further example, key elements in the QUT *Blueprint* (2004b) call for new ways of working, and in particular for a greater ability to integrate what we do and to “transcend the barriers of organisation, disciplinary and other boundaries to make best use of QUT resources and to focus on improving student learning and on developing competitive advantages in research”. In teaching-service activities, it is possible therefore, through the adoption of this model, to actively promote communities of practice and work relationships as the *Blueprint* exhorts – across traditional barriers of organisation and disciplines: locally to ensure that the best use is made of institutional resources to focus on improving student learning outcomes and also within the Faculty and the broader institutional context, to strengthen the “real-world” positioning in teaching and research through better partnerships across internal and external boundaries (for example, between academics and professional support services, and between full time and sessional teachers through inclusive practice). Engaged teachers also have an important service role to play in influencing the direction and implementation of Faculty and institutional policy to assure quality learning and teaching outcomes for our students in these blended environments.

## Conclusion

The blended teaching delivery model discussed in this paper is grounded in teaching theory whilst responding to the realities of the contemporary needs and interests of both students and academics. The model is focused on positive student learning outcomes, and on making effective and efficient learning possible for students. In achieving these things it can provide academics with professional fulfillment in the teaching aspect of our workload. Additionally, the model can also create efficiencies of time for academics and fruitful opportunities for research and service outputs, without compromising on quality in any of the three areas of our academic endeavours.

However, what does need to be acknowledged for teachers who are prepared to work with different learning and teaching models is that “the stakes and costs of innovation are high” (Salmon, 2000, 89). Therefore, attempts at new and effective approaches to teaching efficiently need to be supported in faculty workloads and embedded in faculty practices. The dissemination of success stories and the sharing of tested and workable templates is also important. The model in this paper is offered in the hope that it might be transferable to the teaching practice of others and thereby of some assistance in the process of reconciling academic and student needs and interests in the contemporary tertiary environment.

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