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EVALUATING A BLENDED/ONLINE DEGREE

Abstract:

The evaluation of entire degrees or programs of study is not a routine activity unlike the evaluation of individual units. However such evaluations can be useful and highlight issues and show both positive and negative student opinions on their learning. The paper shows the results of an evaluation of the Bachelor of Communication from 2015 to 2018.

Keywords:

Blended learning, online education, evaluation

JEL Classification: I29

1 Evaluating a blended learning/online degree:

1.1 A Bachelor of Communication, 2015-2018

Introduction

Higher education is often categorised by the mode of delivery of the program of instruction. In the 21st century use of technology dominates the research into communication education, hence to many higher education administrators previous modes of delivery have become established methods with predictable outcomes. Face to face teaching, distance education, e-learning, v-learning, m-learning, online education, and blended learning are all examples of these modes, which were once new but are now, possibly too established to warrant excitement or even evaluation. But nothing is predictable about blended learning although the vast majority of Australian universities are employing this course delivery mode under the guise of learning management systems.

The term, 'blended learning' is certainly no longer a new mode of delivery, but rather a buzz-phrase that means different things to different people (Torrison-Steele, 2011). Blended learning can indicate the presence of technology being used, and usually denotes the teaching methods employed. The term can also describe the learning experiences which are designed for the students, or the locations from which the events take place. The most usual understanding of the term seems to be that blended learning combines different teaching delivery modes especially Web-based materials on a specific learning management system, and traditional classroom teaching. 'Online learning' similarly has various meanings, but has come to mean purely web-based instruction without the traditional classroom interaction (Archee, 2015). Online education came into vogue around the same time that the Web became an established entity in people's homes, around the late 1990's.

For the past decade, the Australian higher education sector has increasingly been gripped by financial considerations and constant conservative government cost-cutting (Archee & Gurney, 2007). Thus, since 2005, most Australian institutions have used learning management systems as blended/online learning platforms to solve their problems of curriculum renewal and growth and also expand the reach of their programs without incurring expensive infrastructure costs such as new buildings, libraries and classrooms. At most Australian institutions, student contact time with teaching staff has been reduced as staff strive to produce quality education with less funding. Students themselves are also under pressure from higher fees, higher living costs, and employment needs requiring flexibility in terms of attendance and curriculum support, accessible off campus. All aspects of higher education – delivery mode, technical support, research, administration, classroom facilities, assessment and curriculum design have had to change.

Unusually, few Australian higher education institutions evaluate whole courses of study after students have finished their degree. It is only individual units that are evaluated, and the returned sample sizes of these student feedback surveys can be as low as 4% in some cases. From 2016, evaluations of whole degrees has been performed at the national level in the form of the QILT

Course Experience Survey (see <http://qilt.edu.au>) but this annual survey is not nuanced enough to capture specific elements of degrees, such as their blendedness or the effect of online learning. Comparisons of graduate satisfaction with their learning and institution are the main outcomes of this endeavour. But systematic institutional-run evaluations of degree programs is not a regular occurrence and would seem to be an important overlooked feature of degrees at most universities.

Literature Review

There are hundreds of previous studies which have analysed online, e-learning and blended learning used in both individual units and/or programs of study, but only a handful of large meta-analyses that attempt to summarise and synthesise entire literatures. The first major meta-study by Means, et al (2013) compared online learning with traditional teaching, and blended learning with traditional teaching, and concluded there were only modest gains for online learning, but significant gains for blended learning, when compared with purely traditional forms of instruction. The meta-study highlighted the confounding factors of additional time, resources and course elements, which encouraged more interaction between students in blended learning conditions. This additional interaction may be the main reason for the significant outcomes for blended learners, and not traditional/online media mix, per se.

A second meta-analysis by Bernard, et al (2014) focused solely on higher education, and included early studies from 1990 in their review. This meta-study found similar results in that blended learning benefits students on average one third of a standard deviation, with more specific gains enabled by the genre of computer support, and the kind of interaction that is encouraged. It was noted that while the majority of studies depict a range of disparate digital technologies, the traditional classrooms are not as well described. However face to face instruction can be hugely varied from rote learning, and chalk and talk, to discovery learning methods and problem-solving strategies. This would seem to be a problematic oversight, in that the crucial element of the instructor is subsumed under an assumed umbrella concept. Surely the instructor is of central concern in this unwieldy mix of old and new media?

More recent meta-analytical studies have refined their learning content focus and have different findings again. Examining just the health professions, Liu, et al (2016) found that blended learning seems to have a consistent positive effect when contrasted with no intervention, and it is more effective than, or as effective as non-blended instruction for knowledge learning. However, the authors cautioned against fully accepting their conclusions due to huge variations in their sample of 53 studies.

A more recent meta-analysis by Vo, Zheng & Diep (2017) looked at performance outcomes and found that blended learning assisted mainly STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) students as opposed to Arts, Humanities and Communication degrees. This finding agrees with the Liu, et al study since the health professions can be categorised as a sub-set of the STEM degrees. It could be implied then that blended learning may not be as successful with Communication students because the online resources provided by such "soft" degrees are not as significant to these students as opposed to the more necessary technical online resources that a Science student might require. It could be said that STEM degrees have been somewhat under-

taught by traditional instructors in the past, and that the traditional Humanities and Social Sciences degrees had previously been quite successful.

Poquet, et al (2015) in their own systematic review of 20 meta-analyses surrounding blended and online learning identify three main shortcomings in the literature as a whole: assessment practices in blended learning, student support, and the role of the instructor. Only 2.6% of the studies in the literature addressed the subject of assessment (Torrison-Steele & Drew, 2013) with instructors always employing traditional assessment items, on paper or electronic - quizzes, exams, and essays. This oversight is somewhat perplexing given the variety of learning tasks employed in blended learning but assessed with a conservative set of evaluation tools. There is a discrepancy between innovative delivery of inspired teaching activities and the evaluation of this content that is not recognised by most instructors and designers of blended learning programs of study.

The instructor's role has also been remarkably absent in most of the meta-analytic studies to date. Very few studies in the literature evaluate the obvious role of the instructor, but rather concentrate on the technological dimensions relegating blended learning to a kind of online learning. Traditional teaching, which focuses on the instructor seems absent from the discussion. Zhao et al. (2005) found that low instructor involvement in blended learning leads to lower learning outcomes than face to face instruction by itself, but when high instructor involvement is present learning outcomes are significantly better.

While learner support/satisfaction is a major theme of the primary blended learning literature, systematic evaluations of learner support/satisfaction is yet another missing element in most meta-analyses of blended learning. Research to date tends to show that learner characteristics are the most important factor as to whether a student will show favour or disfavour towards a blended learning program. Hence being mature-age, or younger; being an undergrad or a postgrad; being a student who is information-based or people-based, all show non-significant tendencies.

Method

Overview

The Bachelor of Communication program of the Humanities and Communication Arts School of the Western Sydney University, Australia had existed in traditional classroom mode since 2005. Its units comprised a face to face lecture and tutorial, with optional Blackboard resources available according to coordinator preference. The degree has been taught in a completely different, innovative fashion from the beginning of 2015 when all of the BComm face to face units, were converted to blended learning units, any of which could be undertaken in totally online mode. A significant difference to previous years was the addition of dozens of video-pod lectures that replaced traditional lectures for the entire BComm program. Every unit possessed around 25-30 short, 10 minute custom videos located on YouTube. A secondary feature was the visual/navigation standardisation of the Blackboard interface for each of the 24 units.

The aim of this study was to evaluate the entire three year BComm degree, not in terms of the more usual institutional criteria but to ascertain the impact of the new degree on student support, satisfaction and behaviour. Results should be useful in order to make changes to new iterations of the BComm in future years.

Instrument

The chosen method to evaluate the BComm degree was an 87 item online questionnaire that was developed from Pearson & Trinidad's Online Learning Environment Survey (2005) or OLES. The OLES has been tested and used extensively because it has excellent validity and reliability. The instrument was adapted to fit the blended learning environment of contemporary teaching environments, and the computer experience of the student cohort with the Blackboard learning management system.

The original OLES incorporated updated scales from four existing instruments: 1. What is happening in this class? (Fraser et al. 1996); 2. Distance Education Learning Environments Survey (Jegede et al. 2001; Walker, 2002); 3. Technology-Rich Outcomes-Focused Learning Environment Instrument (Aldridge et al. 2003; Aldridge et al. 2004); and 4. Test of Science-Related Attitudes (Fraser 1981).

OLES originally contained 54 items arranged in nine scales: Computer Usage, Teacher Support, Student Interaction and Collaboration, Personal Relevance, Authentic Learning, Student Autonomy, Equity; Enjoyment, and Asynchronicity. The last scale, Asynchronicity was deleted because these items were not applicable in 2015, and replaced by three new scales: Interactive Content, Evaluation & Assessment, and Blackboard Interface & Navigation.

Thus, the modified version of the OLES comprised 6 demographic items, 69 Likert items, and 12 open ended questions that were originally a part of the paper-based OLES scale items. This modified version has 11 major scales, as opposed to the original nine. The design was slightly changed to allow for 7 point bi-polar items with a No Opinion mid-point of 4. All Likert items had a Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (7) design.

After national ethics approval, at the end of 2017 and the beginning of 2018, 3rd year BComm students were invited to participate in the newly named, Blended Learning Survey (BLS). Results were collated with Excel and then imported into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Results

A total of 129 final year students completed the BLS of a total cohort 255 for the two years. This is a return rate of 51%. Several students did not actually finish the degree in these years, so this figure is closer to 55%. There were 44 males and 85 females; 83% were 20-25 years old; 30% PR, 33% Advertising, 19% Journalism, 17% Media Arts; only 2 students were Internationals; 59% had no experience with online units, 25% had done one online unit, 8.5% had done two online units, nearly 4% had done eight or more. A total of 24 units comprises the full degree after 3 years study.

According to this sample the vast majority of students (84%) had either no online units or only chosen one unit in online mode. Median and modal scores indicated zero experience with online units. Mean score was for one unit in online mode.

If one inspects all the tables below, one sees a tendency for participants to fall on the Agree side of the scale (similar to student feedback surveys). There is very little mass disagreement with any of the Likert scale assertions. Thus the highlights of the tables should focus on scores of 4 and below, and 6 and above for indications of strong opinions.

From demographics alone it is worth noting that the online unit take-up has been gradual for the majority of BComm students.

The tables below comprise medians, modes and means because all three measures are more advantageous than the more usual use of means only. Median (and modal) scores can be very useful in summarising opinions with these survey items, where there is skewness in the distribution of scores (Patten & Newheart, 2017).

Computer Usage

Table 1: Descriptives of Computer Usage

<i>Computer Usage</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Use computer to email assignments to teacher	5.00	7	4.57	2.04
Use computer to ask teachers questions via email	5.00	7	5.07	1.56
Use computer to find information about unit content	7.00	7	6.12	1.27
Use computer to read instructions prepared by teacher	6.00	7	5.95	1.18
Use computer to find out info about how my work will be assessed	6.00	7	5.96	1.27
Use computer to take part in online discussions	4.00	4	4.14	1.99

The highlight here is the No Opinion means, modes and medians of “Use a computer to take part in online discussions” which translates into very little use of Blackboard for online discussions throughout the degree. This includes the online students who would be prime candidates for this activity, that is simply underused.

The rest of the items in this scale are high because use of Blackboard is a necessity in order to perform any kind of activity or assignment. Few students email assignments to their instructors (M=4.57) given most coordinators use Blackboard and Turnitin for assignment submissions.

Teacher Support

Table 2: Descriptives of Teacher Support

<i>Teacher Support</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Teachers find time to respond	5.00	6	5.16	1.30
Teachers help identify problems	5.00	4	4.84	1.26
Teachers respond quickly to assignments	5.00	4	4.74	1.35
Teachers give valuable feedback	5.00	6	4.86	1.39
Teachers adequately address questions	5.00	6	5.04	1.23
Teachers encourage my participation	5.00	6	5.05	1.24
Teachers are easy to contact	5.00	6	5.22	1.28
Teachers provide me with useful feedback	5.00	6	4.95	1.36

Teacher support seems to be reasonably well regarded overall, except for “Teachers help identify problems” (students may believe that are left to sort out their own problems) and “Teachers respond quickly to assignments” (probably due to perceived slow marking turnarounds).

Student Interaction and Collaboration

Table 3: Descriptives of Student Interaction and Collaboration

<i>Student Autonomy</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
I can work with others	6.00	6	5.52	1.21
I can relate my work to others' work	5.00	6	5.17	1.34
I share information with other students	5.00	6	5.20	1.34
I can collaborate with other students	6.00	6	5.36	1.37
I am involved in group work	6.00	7	5.81	1.24

Quite positive scores show the ability of the degree to allow for student interaction and collaboration, mimicking professional activities in their future careers. The main highlight here is the finding that most students are involved in group work of some sort.

Personal Relevance

Table 4: Descriptives of Personal Relevance

<i>Personal Relevance</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
I can relate what I learn in the degree to my life outside	5.00	6	5.06	1.40
I am able to pursue topics that interest me in the degree	5.00	6	5.10	1.33
I apply everyday experiences in the degree	5.00	4	4.95	1.21
I link class work to my life outside of this degree	5.00	4	4.78	1.45
I learn things about the world outside of this degree	5.00	6	5.26	1.31

Median opinions are reasonably high in terms of the relevance of learning materials to the outside world.

Authentic Learning

Table 5: Descriptives of Authentic Learning

<i>Authentic Learning</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
I study real problems/situations in class activities	5.00	6	5.16	1.30
I use real facts in class activities	6.00	6	5.40	1.20
I work on assignments with real-world information	6.00	6	5.54	1.26
I work with real examples	6.00	7	5.53	1.27
I apply real world experience to the topic of study	6.00	6	5.39	1.28

Authentic learning is real-world activities and assignments. This is highly regarded due to mostly high agreement.

Student Autonomy

Table 6: Descriptives of Student Autonomy

<i>Student Autonomy</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
I can make decisions about my learning	5.00	6	5.33	1.25
I work during times I find convenient	6.00	6	5.55	1.27
I am in control of my learning	5.00	6	5.16	1.36
I play an important role in my learning	6.00	6	5.61	1.23
I approach learning in my own way	6.00	7	5.58	1.32

Autonomy is appreciated, especially students using their own approaches to learning.

Equity

Table 7: Descriptives of Equity

<i>Equity</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
The teacher gives as much attention to my questions as others	6.00	7	5.64	1.30
I get the same amount of help from my teacher as do others	6.00	7	5.59	1.30
I am treated the same as other students in the class	6.00	7	5.67	1.32
I receive the same encouragement from the teacher as others	6.00	7	5.62	1.34
My work receives as much praise as other students' work	6.00	4	5.24	1.45
I get the same opportunity to answer questions as	6.00	7	5.64	1.30

 others

Equity is well regarded except for “My work receives as much praise as other students’ work”. This is not an easy question to answer unless students can see the marks of other students. This may explain the modal score of 4 (No opinion) here.

Enjoyment

Table 8: Descriptives of Enjoyment

Enjoyment	Median	Mode	Mean	SD
I prefer blended learning	5.00	4	5.17	1.39
Blended learning is exciting	5.00	4	4.85	1.34
Blended learning is worthwhile	5.00	4	5.09	1.36
I enjoy studying in a blended manner	5.00	4	4.96	1.47
I would enjoy my education more if more of my classes were online	4.00	4	3.50	1.60
I am satisfied with my blended classes	5.00	4	4.91	1.33
I would enjoy my education more if more class time was face to face	5.00	4	4.75	1.41
I would prefer the use of more paper-based resources	4.00	4	3.90	1.60

Enjoyment is a tricky scale to respond to because it implies that students have another standard by which to compare. If they have only experienced blended learning then they would be hard pressed to answer these items. However there is a negative opinion expressed about “I would enjoy my education more if more of my classes were online” (median=4.0; M=3.5, SD=1.60). And the same can be said for “I would prefer the use of more paper-based resources (median=4.0; M=3.9, SD=1.60). This paradoxical finding probably is a result of different interpretations of the word ‘online’ as being both web-based and also non face-to face.

Interactive Content

Table 9: Descriptives of Interactive Content

Interactive Content	Median	Mode	Mean	SD
I access the discussion forums/blogs at places convenient to me	5.00	4	4.68	1.55
I read posted messages at times that are convenient to me	5.00	4	5.07	1.43
I take time to think about my messages before I post them	5.00	7	5.47	1.26
The process of writing and posting messages helps me to think	5.00	4	4.88	1.40
I find it useful to have a written record of messages to refer back to	5.00	4	4.99	1.33

I find that posting messages improves my writing skills	4.00	4	4.64	1.39
I view all the weekly online lecture pods	5.00	4	4.89	1.60

This scale relates to online discussions that are underused (see Table 1). Paradoxically, being able to think about posts is a definite benefit here (median= 5.00; M=5.47, SD=1.26), but this does not result in better writing. The online lecture pods are appreciated but statistics show that all the pods are not viewed by most students. Students may not be quite truthful when they record their viewing habits here.

Evaluation & Assessments

Table 10: Descriptives of Evaluation & Assessments

<i>Evaluation & Assessments</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
I prefer individual assignments	6.00	7	5.57	1.37
I approach my teacher for help with individual assignments	5.00	5	5.13	1.24
I approach my fellow students for help with individual assignments	5.00	4	4.91	1.60
I prefer group assignments	4.00	4	3.48	1.70
I approach my teacher for help with group assignments	5.00	4	4.88	1.43
I approach my fellow students for help with group assignments	5.00	4	5.19	1.32
I prefer online quizzes	5.00	6	5.00	1.71
The Blackboard marking system has helped me to improve my assignments	4.00	4	4.57	1.43

There is a clear preference here for individual assignments, and a somewhat indifferent attitude to Blackboard helping to improve student work.

Interface & Navigation

Table 11: Descriptives of Interface & Navigation

<i>Blackboard Interface & Navigation</i>	<i>Median</i>	<i>Mode</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>
Blackboard is easy to navigate	6.00	6	5.43	1.39
Blackboard is user friendly	6.00	6	5.33	1.37
Blackboard is easy to obtain assignment feedback from	5.00	6	4.92	1.52
Blackboard is easy to access from a tablet	4.00	4	4.40	1.69
Blackboard is easy to access from a phone	4.00	4	3.45	1.74
Blackboard is hard to locate specific information on	4.00	4	3.76	1.53

Blackboard items show reasonably easy access, navigation and user friendliness. However access from a table or phone is quite difficult, and search facilities could be improved.

Statistical testing

Online students vs classroom students (t-test of means)

One major difference between this sample of students is the finding that the majority of the sample (59%) had not taken a single online unit, but that 4% had taken 8 or more units in online mode. These experiential disparities are significantly different ($t=2.78$, $df=79$, $p<0.01$) on the Likert item "I would enjoy my education more if more class time was FTF". The highly experienced, online group disagreed significantly more than the classroom students. Doing a single online unit made little difference to opinions of classroom students. The difference of enthusiasm for FTF seems to be a function of undertaking quite a few, presumably successful, online units. This indicates that the online mode is highly suitable for a fairly small percentage of students, probably less than 10% of the cohort.

Paradoxically, there is no difference between online and classroom students on the item, "I would enjoy my education more if more of my classes were online". This could be a misinterpretation by classroom students that the question was relating to their own limited version of "online". It could also mean that online students were quite content with their own take-up of online units, and did not aspire for more.

Which group watches the most video-pod lectures? (ANOVA, t-tests)

Statistical testing using ANOVA to ascertain whether any demographic group watches the most video lectures does not reveal any differences in terms of Gender, Major, Age, or number of online units taken. The answer to "I watch all the weekly video pod lectures" is distributed fairly evenly over the entire 7 points of the Likert scale. Online students do not watch the video pods any more than their classroom counterparts.

This is hardly surprising given the low attendance rates of traditional lectures prior to 2015. Unit figures (hit rates) for some core units show very low viewing rates of most of the video lectures, and this rate decreases over the duration of the unit. The first one or two weeks are usually well watched, but this drops off very quickly, unless there is a specific reason to view a video such as an assignment, or a special guest appearance.

Given the costs to creating these video-pod lectures – staff time, workload, hardware, support - the continued creation of video pods is questionable unless students can be persuaded to view them. Aligning video-pods with assignments, class work or exams is a possible solution here. Viewing the pods in tutorials *en masse* would also serve to increase the hit rates. The extra time involved might be as low as 10-15 mins per week. This could also occur with online classes but attendance at the non-compulsory videoconferencing weekly tutorial is also quite low for many BComm units.

Open Ended Items

The original OLES comprised open-ended questions embedded in the paper-based survey. The modified version needed to separate these into Part 2 of the online survey. These questions derived from the scales but were updated to include “blended learning” not “online learning”:

76. Do you have any issues with computer usage? If so please provide details.
77. Please specify any other teacher support details.
78. How would you describe your experience of interaction & collaboration within the blended/online environment?
79. What are some things that you like about blended learning?
80. Any other comments on real world learning?
81. Does blended learning support you as a learner?
82. Has the teaching provided you with a satisfactory level of attention befitting your needs?
83. Has the blended learning been enjoyable? Please explain.
84. Do you find online communication easy? Please explain.
85. Did you have any problems with electronic, individual or group assignments? Please explain.
86. Do you have any issues with the Blackboard interface or design? Please explain.
87. Any other comments?

Not all of the participants who completed the Likert scale items went on to complete the open-ended questions. Those who did, usually had strong opinions and wanted to voice them. Of the 129 participants, 66 attempted Part 2 of the survey. The findings from the open-ended items are summarised one by one with selected typical comments:

76. Do you have any issues with computer usage? If so please provide details

Very few participants answered this question. Here are two problems:

- Tablet support across the uni websites.
- Often online texts may not load, for units where the textbook is online this means it may be difficult to continuously access the prescribed text. However, if this was resolved the textbook being online is a much easier, and cheaper experience.

These omissions are probably correctly identified by students who believe that their learning should reflect their major way for communicating with the world: using a mobile phone. Online textbooks from the library are also quite cumbersome to view and read on all platforms, not just tablets and phones.

77. Please specify any other teacher support details.

Not many participants responded to this question. Here are the main concerns:

- The people who help out in the studio are godsend, they assist you whenever you need it and work as hard as you do to create what you want in the studio to help you reach your vision, often coming in early and leaving late to help you.

- Teachers are mostly supportive and interactive.
- Face to face support is fantastic.
- Email response time could be better. More detailed responses would be appreciated too. Many times I get one sentence answers to complex questions.
- Teachers are friendly and encourage us to do work.

78. How would you describe your experience of interaction & collaboration within the blended/online environment?

Some direct quotes:

- The online Blackboard page is a site that is easy to access and navigate, making it easy to understand what needs to be done for weekly activities and assignments.
- It was okay. I only go on Blackboard primarily to watch lecture pods, do online quizzes, check the Learning Guide and read feedback on assignments. I do not use it or see it as an effective place of interaction or collaboration.
- I personally prefer Face to Face learning as to be honest, I watch lecture pods only when it is required to complete an assignments such as online quizzes.
- love it! makes it very easy for full time workers and people who prefer to work on their own. I personally disliked most in class tutorials as it was so group work oriented.
- I found certain tasks such a journal entries confusing, although many lectures expected students to completely tasks weekly this wasn't well specified in some units. overall use of Blackboard is okay.
- It's very useful with interactivity, from lecture pods, announcements and reading. I don't use the discussion board. Usually most information I find through the learning guide or chatting with fellow students on Facebook.
- Terrible. Blackboard sucks. Nothing about it makes me want to use it to collaborate. I just use Facebook messenger instead. Again, the whole system needs to be revamped. Use a different provider, Blackboard sucks.
- Most of the collaboration I have done with other students has been outside of the online environment provided by Western Sydney University, mostly through Facebook, Whatsapp, etc. I have found it very difficult to collaborate with other students because of the VERY LIMITED CLASS TIME, and the push to take away in-class face to face learning. Blackboard has been useful to provide a centralised place for unit and weekly information, but online lecture-pods IS NO COMPARISON TO ATTENDING A LECTURE AND BEING ABLE TO INTERACT FACE TO FACE.

Given the lack of use of discussion boards, and students' preferred mode of communication being instant messaging, a possible improvement to Blackboard is the inclusion of a dedicated instant messaging system for communication for student-student, and student-instructor communication.

Alternatively, an existing app such as WhatsApp could be employed. The author allows SMS messages with students, and this works well, and is not abused.

79. What are some things that you like about blended learning?

- I find it great. You can learn at your own pace and it is worth more the more effort you put into it. I find online readings and lecture pods quite useful, while the classrooms are times where things are put into context and other useful areas are taught. Obviously the downside with blended learning is that some students will be lackadaisical with readings and lecture pods, but the silver lining there is that it differentiates them from the students who want to do the work. If students want to learn, they'll put the effort in. You can only simply offer the resources and encouragement.
- Being able to watch the weekly lectures in your own time and replay parts was useful. The turnitin system is simple and easy to use too.

The vast majority of students approve of blended learning because it is so flexible.

80. Any other comments on real world learning?

- During my Public Relations internship, it was discussed by the firm team and I that a lot of the work at University is too theoretical for the real world. We agreed that although it is good to get a basic knowledge in theoretical areas such as communication models and how to research properly, I am still doing highly analytical theory research in 3rd year and it is just not relevant. I do agree that WSU offers a more practical based learning approach compared to other University's however it is not relevant to this detail in the real world. More focus on real world.
- From my little experience in the industry thus far, there is little "real world learning" that actually occurs in my degree. There are small sections that do use elements of real world examples, however specifics are often missed and I have found myself quite clueless in my working experience so far.
- Nothing beats a face to face class. Being able to bounce questions off a tutor and class mates greatly aids the learning experience. Also, as online classes still have a set time to be at a tutorial, it doesn't allow full freedom.
- My experience has been that online learning is less effective in imparting information and allowing collaboration than face to face learning. The ABS and Department of Education statistics show that students who study in an online mode are significantly more likely to drop out of their courses... I think this is a reflection of the ineffectiveness of online learning.

There is an obvious tension between theory and practice in all aspects of pedagogy. This tension is also reflected by BComm students.

81. Does blended learning support you as a learner?

This question was not commonly answered, but for those who did respond the opinions were 100% positive. The lack of response probably indicates a lack of reflection about their own learning styles, and also requires another sort of learning to compare their own experiences with.

- I think having the ability to talk one on one to tutors is way more efficient than email. So blended learning is still vital.
- Yes, most of our career is based online so if you struggle to use a unit developed website then I don't see how you would function in the real world.
- I find it does. It teaches me to drive further into learning rather than sitting back and listening to a teacher dribble on. Learn at your own pace, as I say.
- Definitely. What I think might not be on the right track so, listening to someone else can further my opinion and make me think of different things.

82. Has the teaching provided you with a satisfactory level of attention befitting your needs?

Instructors, teaching resources and assignments could be improved upon according to a few students. Exemplars of required work are mentioned, plus less theory, and more experienced tutors:

- I still feel that media is such a fast paced industry that more needs to be done to keep up with requirements we need to work in the industry straight from graduation. There were too many fluff classes including mediated mobilities, writing ecologies, media memory, and media cultures and industries. The core concepts of these classes could have been condensed into one or at most two classes, and the remaining replacing core units could have been focused on SEO and social media, and using editing software. It's not only media arts student who need these skills but ALL students going into communications.
- Depends on the tutor. Some have been really good, others not so. Some are in their own worlds. I think they struggle to relate to students.
- I think more so than others. They do attempt to try which is satisfactory enough but examples of work would help to identify what to aim for in an assignment.
- Some teachers do, some do not. It is difficult / frustrating to have a teacher who is teaching someone else's unit and does not know the content very well. Most of the time when you ask them a question, they are unsure of the answer and I am left guessing.

83. Has the blended learning been enjoyable? Please explain.

Most participants found the blended learning concept to be flexible, helpful and thus enjoyable.

- Yes I enjoy coming into class, but also being able to learn in the comfort of my own home.
- Somewhat. I prefer face to face learning. Interacting with other students and asking questions during tutorials make me feel more engaged and learn better. I also like having online resources (lectures, articles, etc) which I can access any time. I did not take any online classes. Therefore, I cannot comment about this area.

84. Do you find online communication easy? Please explain.

A typical complaint was having to use email in order to contact tutors for advice. Some sort of chat system was suggested by a few participants reflecting students' own preferred mode.

- Yes. Online communication does not require too much energy. Emails, instant messaging, SMS - these make communicating much simpler and more convenient.
- Yes. Might be good to have a faster way to communicate with tutors/lecturers e.g. messenger type function for instant messaging. This would be easier than trying to locate or remember teacher emails
- Online communication is too mediated by technology for it to ever be as effective as face to face communication, I think this impairs communication in a learning environment. Online communication is no easier than face to face communication but it is less effective.

85. Did you have any problems with electronic, individual or group assignments? Please explain.

A very common complaint was the necessity to work in groups. Not one participant praised groupwork because of lazy other team members.

- I did not have a problem with electronic or individual assignments. Group assignments were the worst. I only had two good groups during the whole three years of university. A lot of students do not take assignments or their studies seriously, whereas, I want to finish at a high standard. My groups had poor communication skills and a small attention span, they would keep checking their phones and go off subject. For most of my groups, I had to do most of the work because nobody was getting back to me, or they just were not pulling their weight. I always told my teachers the situations so that they were up to date with what was going on. I would prefer if there was less group assignments.

- Group assignments, some people you work with don't want to pull their weight and arguments start and I find a lot of the time I will notify a tutor and they don't do anything. I was in a group where one girl did practically nothing until all of our parts were put in and she basically deconstructed all our sections and wrote exactly what we all already had and when we complained to the tutor nothing was done about it, even after all filling out the peer evaluation form she got the same marks as us. I also sent the teacher proof of google docs edit history and our group chat.

86. Do you have any issues with the Blackboard interface or design? Please explain.

Most found the Blackboard interface to be useful, but there were some vocal complaints:

- Blackboard is fine, just move the lectures to face to face and give students proper journal articles to read before class.
- Blackboard could improve if it was tablet/phone friendly as sometimes it doesn't work on browsers on those systems.
- The site is fine. The issues and confusion comes when different units are formatted differently. Implementing a standard site layout which can be adjusted slightly to suit different units would be a very big help towards making the site easier to interact with. Such as having the learning guide in the same place of every unit's Blackboard client.

87. Any other comments?

Some recommendations by students were suggested:

- I feel that the tutors are not as responsive as they should be and only answer the questions we ask bluntly and do not inform us of other information that we might need to know about. They say they cannot help us with the assignment due to some irrelevant cheating excuse. I ask them for assistance so I can properly do my assignments and not receive some fluffy response where I still don't have the answer. They need to support us a lot more when we ask questions, because it just makes us hesitate and not want to ask for HELP! Yet we are told to ask questions but don't receive a real response.
- Great course. Fantastic teachers, just more engaging online lectures please. And PLEASE ensure lectures, Learning Guides and other information are up-to-date!
- I think the university should focus its attention on the quality of "deep discussion learning", where conversations between students based on the content take place, and the tutor directs the discussion.
- Blackboard needs a way to connect to other students easier. Right now people just ask for their Facebook details or phone numbers.

Discussion

The original purpose for the BLS was to obtain feedback on opinions about support, satisfaction and attitudes for the entire BComm degree. To this end the BLS provided an excellent tool for discerning a range of such feedback. Few universities encourage exit surveys of full degrees or programs of study in Australia, possibly highlighting a largely overlooked or ignored pedagogical component. While individual semester unit evaluation is now mandatory, this was never always the case 20 years ago. Perhaps whole degree evaluations are sitting in that same place today and may become more commonplace in the future?

Overall the BComm degree seems to be regarded fairly highly on most of the BLS items by its students. While Strongly Agree scores were rarely recorded, almost zero Disagree scores were selected by students leaving a small range of opinions that students choose – from No Opinion (4) to Agreement (5 and 6). Many of the open-ended questions with half the sample are polarised in terms of opinions, from “love it!” type responses to “get rid of it!” replies. This accords with mandatory unit teaching evaluations carried out every semester. Students responses here are usually inconsistent with some expressing wholehearted admiration of a unit, and some saying it is a waste of time. What is apparent are some highly agreed-upon suggestions and observations, namely:

1. group assignments need to be judiciously prescribed and monitored carefully by instructors;
2. very little use is made of forums on the Blackboard system; and
3. an institutional chat-type system needs to be used or customised in keeping with everyday student interpersonal communication preferences (see Gülbahar & Madran, 2009).

The BLS shows that there are few differences between blended learning in its institutional format of Blackboard plus face to face classes, and completely online learning. Very capable students will opt for online mode if they are working or simply time-poor, but ordinary students tend to understand the difficulty of taking a unit without much contact with an instructor, and choose blended mode. Comparisons of blended and online modes with traditional delivery methods were not possible due to the mandatory use of Blackboard for support, most resources and assessment. Students in this degree could not escape the use of web-based resources and submission via the Turnitin duplication software.

The survey itself attracted only about 55% of the student cohort, and the only guaranteed way to obtain participation was to ask students to participate in class time. The author attempted to advertise the survey via email and the response rate was low (less than 30%). The online nature of the survey was a disadvantage because students probably felt pressured to perform yet another web-based task in their own time. Similarly, student feedback participation on individual units has fallen significantly since the paper-based forms were replaced with web-based ones. Obviously, a higher percentage of returned surveys would assist to obtain a more complete picture of student opinions and attitudes.

The ubiquitous use of learning management systems has led to a near universal adoption of blended learning by Australian higher education institutions. The self-fulfilling prophecy of blended learning seems to be the mantra for administrators and instructors alike, but students are

somewhat unconvinced – they may choose their own menu from the smorgasboard of resources and activities that are available on the website (Nazarenko, 2015; Collopy & Arnold, 2009).

Given the continuous process of degree creation and evolution, occasionally some Australian degrees are changed even before single 3 year cohort has finished their final year. Students have complained that the degree they commenced was not the one that they ended up doing because choices of units and sub-majors had changed. Changing a degree structure is fraught with risk, and is especially problematic if the only reasons for doing so are not based on evidence but due to falling enrolments caused by perceived course flaws or competition from other institutions. Thus, whole degree exit surveys could be a method of assessing real flaws in degree structures.

It is recommended that whole degree evaluations become more commonplace. Graduating students could complete an exit evaluation as a responsible act of earning a degree. Administrators may realise that students have worthwhile suggestions to contribute, ones that can provide much needed information to improve individual units and whole degree structures. Exit surveys may also reduce uncertainty in terms of possible explanations for future setbacks in enrolment figures. Iterations of consistently performing degrees may then be safe for a period of time, and not unnecessarily adjusted due to biased feelings or sheer guesswork.

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