

# STUDENT EXPERIENCES OF FLEXIBLE LEARNING

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## **Abstract**

*At the beginning of 1998, Griffith University opened a new campus in Logan. In order to provide a breadth of study opportunities, and to expand access opportunities to those who are unable to attend the campus regularly, the University offers subjects at Logan through flexible modes of delivery. The Logan teaching and learning environment includes a range of approaches to flexible learning. In particular less reliance on timetabled face to face interaction and an increasing use of the world wide web for teaching and learning.*

*This paper details a small research project that was undertaken to find out how students were approaching their studying at Logan and what resources they found to be most and least valuable for their learning. A particular focus was the use of web resources for learning.*

*The aim of the project was not to obtain statistically viable data but rather to focus on individuals and their personal experiences and approaches with a view to critically reflecting on current resource design and teaching processes.*

## **Keywords**

Student experiences, approaches to learning, flexible learning, web-based learning

## **What is flexible learning at Logan?**

At the heart of the Logan Campus learning environments are the students and teachers. Staff are encouraged to utilise innovative, effective learning and teaching strategies, and to integrate formal face-to-face activities (teacher-student, student-student) with a range of more independent peer-based and individual learning activities (extract Flexible Learning at Logan 1998).

Lecturing, in the conventional sense, is not the primary source of information for students on this campus. That role is largely given over to prepared resources, including print-based materials, audio and video materials, CD-ROM and the web-based materials. In some instances learning activities also draw on resources found within the local community. Peer-based activities are a feature of the Logan learning environment, as is the use of activities which extend the development of understanding to its application (extract Flexible Learning at Logan 1998). This approach is based on a large body of research on student learning and in particular parallels Biggs theory of selecting appropriate Teaching and Learning Activities (TLA's) to address the desired performance of understanding (1996). The strategies vary between teacher, peer and self controlled TLA's. In fact Biggs' case study example is very similar to the sorts of teaching practices that occur in some subjects at Logan (1996: 355).

The University's commitment to flexible learning has been carried directly into campus and building design at Logan, where learning centres provide opportunities for small group, large group and individual activities and combinations of these. The learning centres are comprised of large student work areas with computers, reading areas and study spaces, associated small-group and team-project rooms, linked seminar and tutorial rooms and computer labs for use in discussion, teaching or for individual use. These learning centres provide a purpose built environment for student-centred learning and independent learning activities (extract Flexible Learning at Logan 1998).

Another feature of the Logan Campus environment is the leading edge technology which makes possible the delivery of truly interactive multimedia resources to support learning and teaching. Currently, students have access to workstations at a ratio of 6 students to every workstation. There is also a facility available to allow dial-in access to the Logan Campus web site materials (extract Flexible Learning at Logan 1998).

## **Method**

### *Selecting the sample group*

If we are to determine how students are approaching learning in a flexible environment then we need to examine their experiences in a context where the resources are learner centred, value added and integral to the subject material and teaching.

Talking to students at random was likely to elicit differences that may relate more to individual course and subject design. In this study I was more interested in the different approaches students would have to the same subject material as this would be likely to illuminate difference in learning style and not teaching practice.

Given the small scale of this project it was necessary to single out one particular subject to use as a case study. I chose a subject offered in the second semester of the Bachelor of Arts course, because;

- a) I had worked with the subject convenor in determining how best to integrate the resources
- b) the design of the subject was such as to make use of a range of resources including a website that provided multiple perspectives to stimulate students thinking, facilitate communication and enable self directed learning through interaction.

## **Methodology**

### *Collecting the data*

One of the criticisms that has been levelled at previous research on students' experiences of learning has been that studies are too broad (Entwistle 1997). The aim of this study was to focus very specifically on individual students' experiences.

Research was conducted as a semi-structured focus group. I had a list of issues prepared beforehand but opted to use these only as a starting point or stimulus and let the students lead the conversation and followed the line of their discussion. I hoped (as Entwistle 1997 describes) to explore ideas and experiences of the students by not presenting my own ideas or opinions.

I did have a concern that by talking to students in a group they might tend to answer alike and not be challenged to think on their own. However the group environment stimulated conversation in directions I hadn't anticipated and I found that the students were quite comfortable speaking their mind and made sure I was aware of their particular view or approach.

It is important to note that the group of 7 were made up of:

- a) students who attended the face to face workshop
- b) students who were interested/concerned enough to assist me in my research voluntarily.

This is by no means a representative sample of Logan students. However the range of viewpoints that emanated from the group was diverse enough for me to feel that they did indeed represent multiple perspectives.

## **Data analysis**

The focus group sessions were taped with permission from the group. The conversation was transcribed and then categorised into various themes. I used extracts from the transcript to bring out the full range and meaning of each concept. Analytically this brings out similarities and difference between students.

Although I personally identified the issues, the discussion and sample size of the group was small enough that I feel all issues that surfaced during the conversation have been analysed and discussed in this paper.

## **Results and discussion**

### *About the subject and teaching approach*

In this subject, students encountered a variety of teaching and learning environments and strategies.

This subject has been designed in a resource-based mode, delivered primarily through printed study materials and a website which supports self directed learning. It does not require weekly attendance at lectures and tutorials, and allows choice amongst the modules offered. Given the extent of material in this subject, students are provided with a core introductory module and then a choice of 3 out of 5 modules.

The printed materials comprise a study guide, dossier of readings, and a set text. The study guide introduces students to a discussion of the main topics and debates, guides them through readings, and provides a clear outline of the structure of the subject. The dossier contains additional readings, mainly primary materials such as newspaper articles and editorials, government documents or literary texts.

There is also a website organised on a modular basis. The web pages facilitate communication through an online forum and include an array of images, clips and interactive analysis tools to assist students in preparing for workshops and completing the assessment items for the subject. Students are guided through a fortnightly pattern of review, task, discussion during one week and then review, task, workshops and assessment in the other.

Workshops are offered on campus every fortnight. These provide opportunities for discussion and clarification of the material with the lecturer. In the alternate fortnights discussion occurs primarily through the web forum.

### **Students response to workshops**

All the students interviewed placed high value on the workshop and opportunity to interact with their peers. However this is not surprising as my methodology was confined to students who chose to attend face to face sessions. However the workshop had very different levels of importance amongst the 7 students.

For 2 students Agnes and Anthony, the workshop was an integral part of their learning, and although they may have looked at the Book of Readings prior to the workshop they relied on the workshop to structure and direct their learning.

For Gen, the workshop was a starting point as she was usually behind and went to find out exactly what she had to do for the assessment (this was concurrent with her strategic approach to do the minimum she needed to pass the course). Gen was also the only person in the group to mention communication with her friends as a learning strategy.

For Naomi the workshop was a passive experience; she was happy to absorb the material. She enjoyed didactic teaching, worked well alone.

For Trinettes, Carni and Lisa, the workshop was a supplement to their learning. They were already familiar with the topic as they had worked through the study guide and website in varying degrees before they attended the workshop and were prepared for discussion. All

3 indicated that their learning practices had changed as a result of the way the workshop was structured. They had initially anticipated passive participation but when the lecturer started to demand student participation in the workshops they changed their approach. Lisa commented "we were having a free ride and now we have to start thinking for ourselves". This is credit to the lecturer as she assisted students to make conceptual changes in their approach. These 3 students all appeared very flexible in their learning, quite prepared to interact with the group and gets involved.

### **Students response to the study guide**

The study guide was seen to be a useful resource by all students who particularly liked the structure. Naomi, Carni. Lisa and Trinette all began their preparation with the study guide. Naomi in particular liked the study guide following its instructions exactly.

Agnes and Anthony didn't comment on their use of the study guide in initial discussions. However they commented on the disadvantage they perceived for students on other campuses who "had to be there as if they weren't they missed out on everything". They said it was also "good to have a study guide as a fallback resource". This use of the study guide as fallback resource was reiterated by Carni who said if she was ever in any doubt she would check the guide.

In fact the quality of the study guide as a resource seems to have had an impact on how students used the discussion forums.

### **Students response to discussion forum**

The discussion forum was integrated into the fortnightly subject structure and allocated a 5% assessment mark for participation. To focus student discussion and assist them with ideas, guiding questions were provided for each module. This resulted in little response on the forum. Lisa commented she felt the discussion was contrived, it was "time consuming and did little to help them solve answers". Gen wanted to be able to write "off the top of [my] head" and felt that in the model that had been set up they had to "research all this information". This resulted in "regurgitating what they had learnt rather than putting up their own ideas".

The situation was rectified through discussion and negotiation with the lecturer early on in the semester. Students were still assessed on forum participation but were not limited in the type of discussion they chose to have on the forum. This gave them increased adaptivity and facilitated greater discussion and interaction.

However the discussion on the forum for this subject, Australian and Comparative Studies (ACS) was very different to the discussion that occurred in the forum for another subject New Communication Technologies (NCT) in the same course. At the end of the semester there were perhaps 100 postings on some 25 topic areas in ACS whereas in

NCT there were some 435 postings on 1 topic alone. The same group of students undertook both subjects. I asked then what the difference was between the two.

It appeared that NCT had little structure. Face to face communication with the lecturer was infrequent, although the lecturer interacted with the students extensively through the forum (sometimes anonymously). There was much less guidance as to the direction of the course (no study guide). As a result the students like Lisa and Gen felt they could talk about what they liked on the forum and were able to "freethink". Carni described the discussion as interesting and controversial and there was a lot of disagreement because no one knew what the "correct viewpoint" was. However amongst all this discovery Lisa admitted there was also "a lot of crap and stupid stuff". The two students who were most outspoken about this were Carni and Lisa. Both felt comfortable exploring their own ideas.

As a contrast the forum for ACS was less interesting. Carni describes it as "everyone going in the same direction" and they [the students] found themselves "agreeing with each other" and battling to be critical thinkers. Trinette and Gen thought this was good as it indicated they must be doing the "right thing", Agnes thought it was merely indicative that everyone had been reading the study guide. The contrast in opinions on this issue is indicative of different learning approaches.

## **Students response to the website**

I have drawn a distinction between the forum and the rest of the website as the students seemed to relate to the two differently.

Neither Anthony nor Agnes sought out material on the web (see Table 1). Agnes could not appreciate the value of interactions and was frustrated that the material was not printable. Agnes's reason for not utilising the web material was her failure to make this conceptual shift in her approach to learning. She liked working with what she was familiar with.

Of the five who utilised the web materials they referred to it as their 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> learning activity. The website was primarily used as a backup and alternate stimulus for the subject material. The fact that they did not view the web material as integral to their learning was interesting. It was apparent in the discussion that the students used this subjects' website much more than they did the websites of other subjects.

The students viewed the website as something they actively participated in. Phrases such as "go and do the websites" and "going to people straight away" and enjoying the "visual information to take it in mentally" [the video's] were used by Lisa, Carni and Gen. Most of the website users had utilised the self directed interactive tools such as Language Works [a dynamic tool for analysing poetry and prose] saying it was "much better than just reading the explanation" and indicating they enjoyed the interactivity and the website definitely enhanced the subject material.

However there still appeared to be some factors prohibiting the students from using the website more extensively. One issue which surfaced repeatedly was access.

For many students getting to campus was hard either as a result of distance, study on other campuses, lack of transport or family/work responsibilities. In this subject the aspects of the website which students found most useful (ie the videos and interactions) were not easily downloadable through a modem line. Many indicated that although they liked the resources on the web they could only use them on campus and that this restriction meant they relied more heavily on the printed material (i.e. the study guide) because they could use it at home. Anthony (who didn't use the web material) felt that because of these access issues the website should only be used as backup resource and not made integral to the subject. However this contradicted everything the group were saying in that those subjects whose websites merely contained backup material were hardly (if ever) used.

## **Conclusion**

One of the aims of the Logan flexible learning environment is to accommodate multiple learning styles and approaches. Awareness of the range of learning styles amongst students is imperative in design and development of resource materials. Students access the resources at different stages of their preparation and as a result use them differently (see Table 1). This study demonstrates that students do prefer different learning environments. Flexibility is not in the technology but in the choice.

Interestingly the two students who seemed to have a surface approach to learning were the two that did not utilise the web material and seldom referred to their use of the study guide. It appears they saw the web material as superfluous to the course and not important. Perhaps also as the website for this subject really did present new ideas and require active participation from the students (i.e. they had to think not just read) it was too much for students who adopted a surface approach.

The study guide does refer students to the web materials but not in any detail. As a result, students needed to make their own connection between the web material and the readings. This was unlikely for students who adopted a surface approach to learning. Those students who had a strategic or deep approach to learning did use the web materials to undertake self directed learning activities or to support or supplement what they already knew.

This demonstrates the importance of supporting students towards developing strategies for making choices about their learning. For many not having learnt in a technology rich environment, meant they have no experience of the benefits or problems of learning this way. Although the University provides support technically (i.e. how to use programs, etc.), there is no specific support for students on how to get the most benefit out of flexible learning.

The importance of linking teaching objectives to resource design was again made apparent from this study. The lecturer wanted students to freely enter into discussion on the topic areas yet the excellent structure and guidance of the study guide was an inhibiting factor in this regard. This and other practical feedback received from students on the use of online discussion forums was very enlightening. I had always assumed that the factors which contributed to the success of an online discussion forums were: a) that it was assessable, b) that it was integrated into the subject, and c) that lecturers developed some strategies to enhance discussion. However this study showed that even if these factors are present, if students do not believe they will get some value out of the activity or they find it constrains their freedom of thought, they are not inclined to participate.

The study also affirmed that the key elements of using the web effectively in on-campus teaching are:

1. integrate it with other teaching (be that resources or workshop)
2. ensure that assessment is integral to the content
3. utilise the website for what it's best used for, i.e. multiple perspectives, activities and tasks, self directed learning, and drawing on multimedia components.

However we still have a good way to go in facilitating flexibility in where students learn. We design excellent web resources and yet students can't utilise them to their maximum potential because they don't have access from their preferred place of study (home or an alternate campus).

This table list the learning resources available to students for 1 subject. The number in parentheses indicates in what order the students undertook these learning opportunities.



**Table 1: Use of learning resources**

Student	Study Guide	Website	Readings	Workshop	Peers
Gen		(3) Uses the website as its "pretty informing" . goes to people straight away as it really "sets them off so you can picture them".	(2) then "goes through readings" taking prompts from workshop about which is crucial to assignment	(1) "Usually behind" so uses class as focus to "find out what to do". No idea of assessment until then.	(4) Talks to friends weekly and also "e-mails alot".
Naomi	(1).. Starts here and follows exactly what it says	(2) goes to "look at the website" when study guide says so		(3) attends workshop	
Carni	(1) Goes through study guide at home	(2) "just does all the websites at once" but thats mainly due to location		(3) Attends workshop	
Agnes		Doesn't use website - not for any subject	(1)just reads what :I have to".	(2) Attends workshop	
Anthony			(1) "Looks through readings"	(2) goes to workshop to get better focus	
Lisa	(1) Works through study guide as its really "user friendly and gives you all arguments a prompts. It reinforces you"	(2) Uses webpages to "see visual info to take it in mentally". interviews particularly good.		(3) Goes to workshop	
Trinette	(1)Starts with assessment item "to see what we have to do" and then uses study guide	(2) Website a more of a "backup".		(3) goes to workshop	

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