

Naming and measuring the elephants: sustainable change for blended learning

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Educational development work to replace traditional campus university teaching with more innovative blended learning activities usually involves articulating and questioning assumptions about disciplinary learning. But the assumptions built into the discipline and institutional organizational systems for managing study times and staff workload planning can block innovation. Several previous projects have established that intensive team workshops over 2-3 days, involving support staff working with academics to produce real outputs, can build sustainable capacity for curriculum innovation within academic units. This paper describes current work in one university that makes use of disciplinary curriculum mapping and explicit planning of academic and student workload in the educational design activity. Two pilots in different disciplines are being used to develop a model that can be applied and contextualized as part of a broader sustainable blended learning strategy.

Keywords: blended learning; teaching workload; student workload.

Background and context

The context is an Australian multi-campus University that recognizes the need to use newer learning technologies to provide students with a more flexible and engaging learning experience. The School of Business is embarking on a major program of curriculum redesign, to address concerns about competition in the market for Business degrees – especially from providers offering more flexible study options. The School of Nursing & Midwifery is introducing two new undergraduate programs in 2013, and has decided to replace all lectures with alternative online activities. Both Schools are being given additional resources to support these initiatives, as part of the institutional blended learning strategy.

Like many campus universities, there are few established processes for substantially innovative blended and online learning design. There is central e-learning and teaching staff development support. But until now the primary mechanism for introducing new methods and technologies has relied on individual teachers as ‘early adopters’ (Rogers, 2003). As a result, individual teachers can often only make incremental changes within established programs.

Salmon (2005) argues that simply adding e-learning incrementally into existing practices in campus universities will neither improve quality (in terms of flexibility and efficacy for student learning) nor improve efficiency (in terms of costs). She likens the incremental approach to early attempts at human flight based on flapping wings, when a completely new principle was needed to achieve powered flight. Academic communities tend to be conservative in their approaches to teaching and learning, and individual innovators usually encounter resistance when they try to make significant changes to teaching practice. There are good reasons for this. Disciplinary teaching is a complex system relying on distributed expertise and tacit knowledge, at multiple levels of the university (Russell, 2009). Most of this tacit knowledge is about traditional classroom teaching methods. So for blended learning to fly, we need a systemic team-based approach that gives time and space for rethinking pedagogy, with collaboration between discipline academics and with specialist support.

However, staff workload assumptions, and measuring teaching effort is an ‘elephant in the room’. Academic departments, and individual academics, are often reluctant to be too specific about how they spend their time. Formulae used in enterprise bargaining agreements include assumptions that may not adequately account for new types of teaching work. Student learning time can be another ‘elephant’ in that teachers will often struggle to quantify the time that students take to carry out learning tasks, especially in classes with diverse backgrounds and levels of study skill. Sustainable introduction of blended learning requires that these elephants are not only named, but measured up and allowed space, to avoid completely crushing the benefits of blended learning (Laurillard, 2007).

Building on previous work

Figure 1 summarises some of the previous work on blended learning design that can be built upon. The Curriculum Renewal and E-learning Workload: Embedding in Disciplines (CREWED) model piloted at UNSW (Russell, 2008) and the Course Design Initiative (CDI) at Oxford Brookes (Dempster et al., 2012) were both designed to challenge curriculum assumptions through an intensive 2-3-day team-based design and develop hands-on workshop. Both draw on Salmon's *Carpe Diem* model, which is set up to generate tangible products, in the form of an overall plan and reviewed samples of online learning activities in two days. Another model developed at the University of Hertfordshire – Change Academic for Blended Learning Enhancement (CABLE) has an organisational change focus (Anderson et al, 2008). It was preceded by institutional benchmarking on eLearning capacity, includes a two-day residential and aims to establish ongoing relationships with staff in the central Blended Learning Unit. Central to all versions is a shared planning and visualisation exercise, where the overall learning design is developed collaboratively by a team of discipline academics and educational support staff.

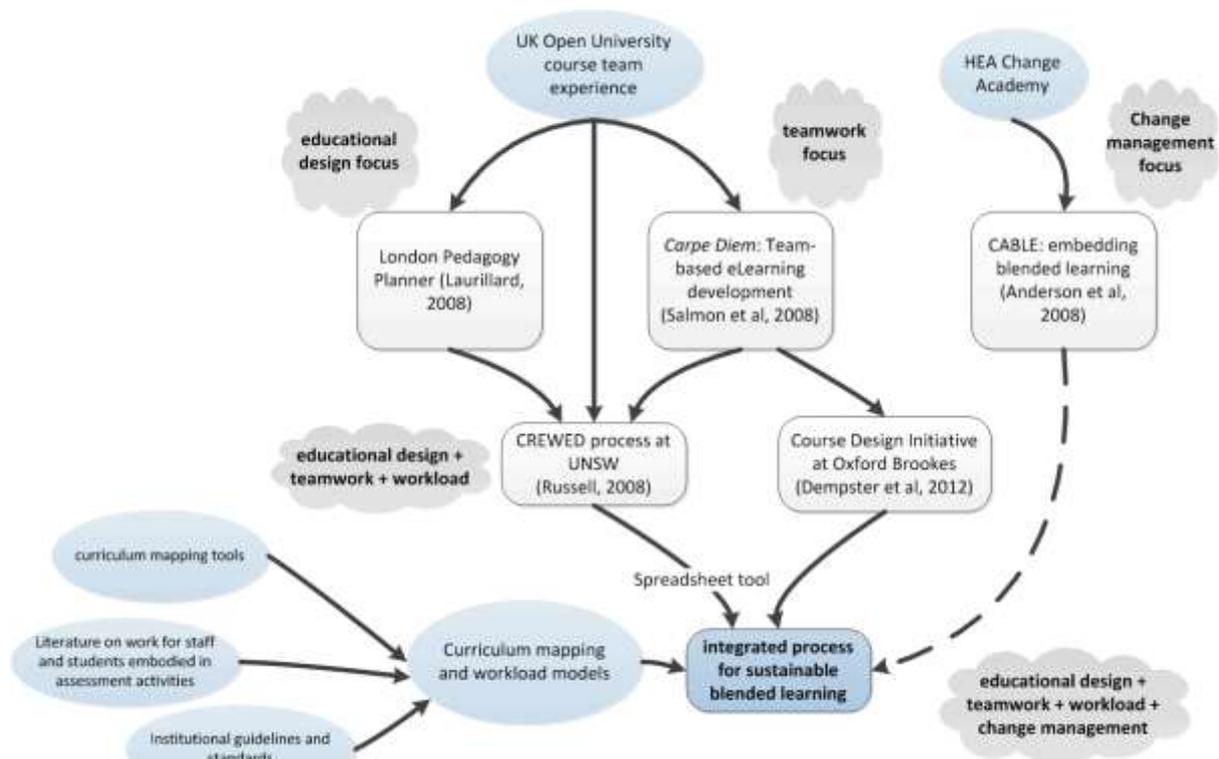


Figure 1. Learning from previous work on curriculum design for blended learning

All of these differ substantially from the more common practice of educational designers and developers working individually with academics through a series of one-on-one consultations. Instead, there is a structured and facilitated process in which a whole team, or in the CDI case sometimes multiple teams, develops a shared visualisation of the learning design. As in the original Open University (OU) course team model, peer review and testing of activities are built in rather than added afterwards. However, the intensive two-day workshop replaces the OU's extended team process, which was developed for large-scale distance education – hence Salmon's choice of the name *Carpe Diem*.

Workload planning in pedagogical design

If e-learning activities in blended learning are treated as an add-on to existing practice, the time required from students and from teachers can blow out to unmanageable proportions. Often there is little hands-on support and teachers have to learn to use the technological tools themselves. A study by Tynan et al. (2012) in four Australian universities found that academic work on online or blended learning 'requires more thorough auditing within specific contexts. Student workloads also need to be managed effectively. Laurillard's Pedagogy Planning (Laurillard, 2008) tool sought to make the types of student work involved in different types of learning design more explicit.

Mapping learning outcomes and assessment

In the original version of the *Carpe Diem* process, Salmon required that all participants had completed her e-Moderating online course. However, this has not always proved feasible (Russell, 2008; Salmon et al., 2009). The 2-day workshop starts by clarifying learning outcomes and reviewing examples of online learning activities before starting on the educational design. In some of the UNSW cases, the first part of the workshop took longer and was more problematic than time allocated had allowed for. When the academic team are both unfamiliar with online interaction with students, and have poorly defined learning outcomes (e.g. focusing on content rather than on what students can do), it is hard for the team to move beyond traditional practices. This is because many of the assumptions about classroom teaching and learning interaction remain tacit, and teachers lack experience of online facilitation. Prior work with the academic teams to articulate and map current practice helps to address this problem.

Current pilot implementation

The current pilot involved running two instances of an intensive design and build workshop process, one for the Property major in the undergraduate Business degree, and one for core units (subjects) in the undergraduate Nursing and Midwifery degrees. The Property program offers distance and campus based study options, and is keen to improve the distance student experience. Three units are being redesigned for semester 2 of 2012, and evaluations of these will be available by November. The Nursing and Midwifery work is for semester 1 of 2013, and is a more radical redesign, in that six core units will be designed to replace all lectures with online activities, while maintaining small group face-to-face tutorials and practical classes. Both disciplines have their own educational models, which can provide starting points for the design process. In both cases there are also external accreditation frameworks that shape the learning outcomes and their assessment.

There are a number of institutional resources available to support the change. We have a comprehensive set of data on the student perspective on use of IT from a survey in 2010, and from routine student feedback systems. Analysis of responses from 1st year Business students has already proved useful in challenging some teacher assumptions about what is feasible. We also have:

- A spreadsheet tool developed by the School of Business for estimating the work embedded in different types of assessment activity, for students and staff, based on published research
- Institutional e-learning quality standards, recently updated
- Curriculum mapping tools to enable each study unit or subject to be designed in a program context (two versions, based on models developed in other universities)
- A spreadsheet tool to capture educational design of each unit, including learning activities, assessment, student workload, staff workload.

The School of Business has been using their 'embedded work' tool for all assessment activities across the undergraduate degree. The School is also using curriculum mapping tools to put assessment activities within units into the context of program learning outcomes. Similarly, the School of Nursing program has had to map its curriculum and assessment for accreditation purposes. Already, some workload planning problems have surfaced, which will need to be addressed to accommodate the shift to blended learning. One is that teaching staff time is allocated only for the semester in which teaching occurs, making it hard to get teachers to commit time to the required design and development in advance.

By including explicit consideration and negotiation of student and staff workloads, we aim to address simultaneously educational design, team-building, workloads (for staff and students) and change management. Each academic unit has established processes for assigning work to academic staff, and there is an over-arching agreement at institutional level on how workloads are allocated. Some of the guidelines and processes will need to be reviewed and adjusted, or at least re-interpreted, to implement blended learning effectively.

Figure 2 summarizes the process being piloted. As with the Oxford Brookes CDI project, it will be necessary to adapt the scale of each two-day workshop to the context. Two pilot workshops were held in July 2012: one for three subjects in the School of Business Undergraduate Property Program and one for six 1st year undergraduate subjects in the School of Nursing & Midwifery.

Both Schools involved in the pilots are planning to roll out further development of blended learning across their undergraduate curricula in 2013 and 2014. Each pilot will therefore inform a School-based version of the process. In both cases there is parallel work going on to map the curriculum in relation to accreditation requirements for the degree programs. Curriculum mapping is an important preliminary step, because it clarifies

Unit learning outcomes. Agreed and well formulated learning outcomes are a prerequisite for articulating and questioning tacit assumptions about learning and teaching practices in the discipline. Once these two Schools have successfully run the process several times, it should be possible to develop a standard process that can be run and adapted as necessary for other programs.

Planning and monitoring of teaching workloads and skill development will be an important part of the pilots. One specific aim will be to identify efficiency gains that will justify investment of time spent in advance work on blended learning design and development. Another will be to identify where planning, workload models and support staff activities need to change to sustain the expansion of blended learning throughout the curriculum.

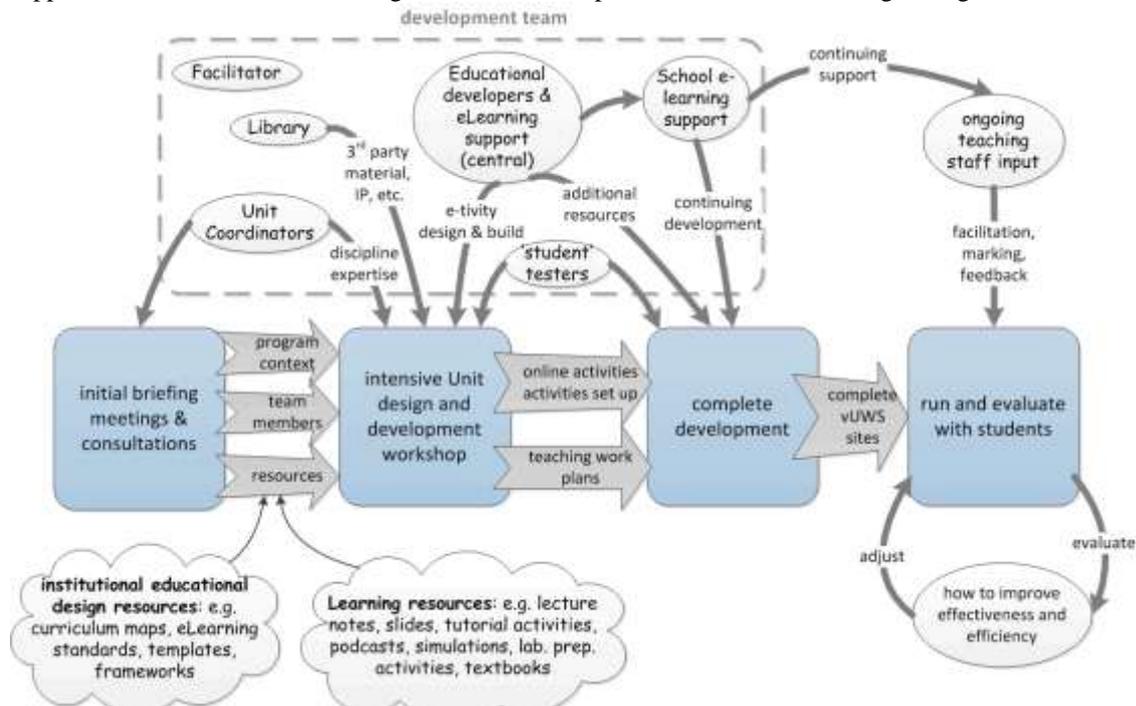


Figure 2. Blended learning design process being piloted in 2012

What we have learnt thus far

The workshop for the Property program took place over three days. The first day involved a program overview session with the whole academic team (6 academics), at which we reviewed the current educational designs and identified three basic types – each with a different assessment pattern. Then we had a two-day intensive hands on workshop with 3 academics to develop new online assessment activities for the three units running in semester 2. While there have been a few minor glitches, overall the process succeeded in addressing the aims of the *Carpe Diem* process (Salmon et al., 2008), in that the team now has a shared approach that can be applied to other Units for next year. From the School perspective the exercise was extremely successful in that it improved the efficiency and effectiveness of assessment and feedback (for example by introducing group assessment tasks, use of formative quizzes, rubrics for marking). The fact that the School has a clear model for ‘embedded work’ provided a focus and a driver for the design of new online activities, as did the urgency of preparation for the upcoming semester.

The Nursing and Midwifery workshop was more ambitious – more like the multi-team workshops described by Dempster et al. (2012). We ran it for 6 separate Unit teams over two days. Attendance was patchy, with some staff unable to be there for the full two days – damaging the teambuilding process. Despite much prior discussion about the new curriculum for 2013, there may have been insufficient allowance for up-front planning and design work in the semester before the main teaching work. We were unable to fully ‘seize the day’ and have had to run a number of separate follow-up sessions (with each Unit team) to complete the work.

These outcomes have confirmed that team-building (Salmon et al., 2008) and workload planning for staff (Tynan et al., 2012) and for students (Laurillard, 2008) are all essential parts of the blended learning design process. We have begun to show how these complementary factors can be managed together as part of the organizational change required for effective introduction of blended learning (Russell, 2009).

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