

## Favourable conditions for effective and efficient learning in a blended face-to-face/online method

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### *Abstract*

*This paper discusses a blended face-to-face/online teaching delivery model that aims to make effective and efficient learning possible for students. It connects the practice of the model with Ramsden's six key principles of effective teaching and offers seven 'favourable conditions' the author considers necessary for the model to achieve its aims.*

### *Keywords*

*blended, online, learning, flexible, face-to-face, effective, efficient, conditions*

### **Introduction**

Computer-based learning technologies have long offered academics opportunities to move away from traditional classroom-based approaches to learning and teaching in higher education. Consequently, academics in universities in 2005 have much more scope to respond to contemporary student demands for greater flexibility in their learning environment, without having to compromise on the quality of their teaching. Academics can also use these new technologies as tools to cope with the increasing professional demands we face, such as teaching greater numbers with fewer resources. Online learning opportunities are at the centre of these technological possibilities, providing scope for, amongst other things, completely virtual learning environments and blended face-to-face (f2f)/online teaching delivery and assessment methods. As a result, increasingly, e-learning opportunities are being embraced in the tertiary sector (DEST, 2002).

This paper documents an action research project (supported by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Teaching Fellowship program of 2005) that aimed to develop a transferable, blended f2f/online teaching delivery model. The author's intention was to integrate best practice in traditional, as well as technology-based teaching methods, to deliver an effective and efficient learning environment for students. This paper explains the blended model resulting from the project and explores a number of favourable conditions the author considers important to achieving the aims of efficiency and effectiveness through it.

### **QUT Teaching Fellowship project 2005**

This project was made possible as a result of the support of a QUT Teaching Fellowship for the author in 2005. QUT's Teaching Fellowship program is designed to encourage, reward and support the development, enhancement and recognition of teaching and effective learning at QUT (QUT Teaching Fellows, 2005). The program for 2005 involved Fellows using the units they teach as models for exploring the effective integration of educational technology to enhance learning environments, and to create optimal learning outcomes for students. In the author's case, an ongoing action research project that began in 1999 in a unit entitled *Alternative Justice Processes* was used as the focus (Field, 2004). This elective unit, offered in first semester every year to second and third year students, usually has an enrolment of about 70 students.

At the outset, the learning and teaching enquiry in *Alternative Justice Processes* focussed on enhancing the author's own perception of the diversity of teaching delivery methods available to improve effective learning outcomes (Farber, 1968, p. 10; Dunkin, 1983, p. 64). The project developed over time, however, into an imperative to provide a quality f2f student learning environment enhanced with explicitly integrated online learning experiences. Satisfying this imperative has been the dominant aim of the teaching model developed through the 2005 Teaching Fellowship. The other major aim was to work the model into a pedagogically persuasive and transferable form for the Faculty of Law at QUT. To use Laurillard's words, the foundation of the endeavour has been to "adapt to new conditions while preserving the traditional high standards of an academic education" (1993, p. 256).

The blended f2f/online model trialed in 2005 involved three key components aimed at achieving effective and efficient learning (what is meant by this term is discussed in more detail below). The first component involved provision of unit content to students via a detailed study guide workbook following a modular, structured approach. The workbook incorporated content, key summaries, readings, thinking points and discussion questions. It was designed to obviate any perceived need on the part of students for a unit textbook, as well as the need to provide 'lecture notes' to students. It acted as the foundation for content and concept learning in the unit, and was used to fundamentally support the f2f and online learning environments. The workbook acted as a springboard for the critical analysis, theoretical and attitudinal learning objectives of the unit.

The second component of the model involved replacing f2f traditional lectures with active learning f2f workshops. These workshops took place in the first two weeks of the semester and then every alternate week. The design of the action learning workshops aimed to build a strong, trusting community of learning amongst the students, as well as to create an enthusiastic, motivating learning environment that encouraged deep learning. Two special aims of the first two f2f sessions of the semester were: to develop a relationship and rapport amongst the students, as well as between the students and the lecturer, to facilitate and encourage participation in the online component of the model; and, to consult and negotiate with students about the unit delivery model and key assessment issues in order to finalise a collective learning contract about these matters.

The third component of the model involved assessed online discussion worth 30% of the overall unit grade. The online discussions constituted the learning and teaching focus for 5 weeks of the semester and were highly structured. Three discussion topics, developed from the study guide workbook, were provided to students for each online week; students chose only one on which to make their contributions. Whilst structured, the discussion topics were specifically designed to have no right or wrong answer, and to allow for (and in fact encourage) a range of possible correct responses and perspectives.

As noted above, the model explicitly involves students in discussing and negotiating (in class and online) aspects of the teaching delivery model and assessment program for the unit. For example, the Semester 1 2005 cohort of students successfully negotiated for the 30 marks allocated to participation in online discussions to be divided into 6 marks for each week of the semester spent online. Also, the marking criteria for the online discussions were developed in consultation with students. These criteria centred on the number of contributions, the quality of contributions to discussion on the topic (Bender, 2003, p. 58), evidence of reflection (including self-reflection, and reflection on/response to/engagement with other students' contributions), and evidence of thoughtful and critical analysis. The criteria were developed more fully for students in a criteria referenced assessment sheet that provided progressive formative feedback on each week's online work, as well as the summative mark for the week. Two take-home exams of 35% value each completed the assessment program. The take-home exams included short answer questions as well as researched, analytical questions. Elements of the online discussions that had generated significant interest were integrated into both of these assessment pieces.

Student feedback on the model used in the unit in Semester 1 2005 was predominantly positive. In Week 8 of the semester, 20 students of a cohort of 67 responded to a formal (university administered) voluntary online unit evaluation. On a scale of 1-5 (where 5 is the best) the unit scored 4.6 with 19 students saying that overall they rated the unit as being good or very good. All students who responded to the evaluation either agreed or strongly agreed that the teaching methods used in the unit worked together to help them to learn; that the assessment criteria explained clearly how the assessment items were to be marked; and that they understood the requirements of the overall assessment program. Fifteen of the 20 students strongly agreed that the author had developed a class atmosphere that helped them to learn, and 19 students agreed or strongly agreed that online resources had been used in ways to help their learning. Some students chose independently to provide further written feedback about their experience of the unit. One student wrote: "*Alternative Justice Processes* has been a valuable unit within the Justice degree. It has adapted to student needs in its method of assessment and appreciation of this has been shown in the quality of contributions made particularly within the online component. The flexibility and support of the unit coordinator has ensured a constructive and positive learning environment where students have participated on a high level."

### **What is meant by effective and efficient learning in the blended model developed for this project?**

The notion of making effective and efficient learning possible (Laurillard, 2002, p. 11; Ramsden, 1992, p. 5), has been central to this project, and is foundational to the favourable conditions for the model articulated below. The author's understanding of these concepts therefore warrants elaboration.

### **Effective learning**

The idea of effective learning is understood to be directly connected to effective teaching. Effective teaching can be thought of as being the process of making student learning possible (Ramsden, 1992, p. 5). And yet, as student learning is possible on a number of different levels, ranging from deep to superficial, it is more than this alone. Effective teaching is considered in this project, then, to mean teaching that creates an environment in which deep learning outcomes for students are made possible, where high quality student learning is promoted, and where superficial approaches to learning are discouraged (Ramsden, 1992, p. 86). Achieving effective learning in this way requires a student-centred, outcome-focused approach that encourages high-level cognitive engagement with unit content and concepts. It is also requisite that students are motivated to learn through the teaching process (Wlodkowski, 1999). Socio-constructivist theories confirm the importance of community and interactive forces to motivation (Wlodkowski, 1999, p. 8), which, in turn, links effective teaching with modes of delivery that promote engagement and discussion (Dunkin, 1983, p. 75; Cannon, 1988, p. 3) in ways that allow for egalitarian participation (Bender, 2003, p. 65). Effective teaching can also be considered from the perspective of the provision of learning experiences that reach out to students' different learning styles and preferences.

Ramsden articulates six key principles of effective teaching in higher education that can act as indicators of achieving effective learning (Ramsden, 1992, p. 86). Concerns exist about the efficacy of both traditional f2f teaching methods, such as lecturing (Beard, 1976, p. 100; Gibbs, 1982; Cannon, 1988, p. 3; Kraft, 1990; Bridgstock, 1995, p. 1; Hativa, 2000, p. 75; Laurillard, 2002, p. 92), and online methods (Barbera, 2004; Benigno & Trentin, 2000; Oliver, 2004, p. 1), in achieving effective learning. Ramsden's principles are used here, however, to demonstrate how the design of this blended model was specifically targeted at creating a learning environment that satisfies the concept of effective learning articulated above.

Ramsden's first principle of effective teaching is that of ensuring student interest (which includes making learning of unit material a "pleasure" for students) and providing skilled explanation (Ramsden, 1992, p. 96). In this model, the three components of the method; namely, the study guide workbook, the f2f active learning sessions, and the assessed online discussions, were designed to work together to achieve this principle. The key strategy adopted in the model's design was reliance on Laurillard's 'conversational framework' (2002, pp. 86–89). This framework is based on "iterative dialogue" that is "discursive, adaptive, interactive and reflective" (Laurillard, 2002, p. 86). Clarity of explanation was therefore achieved through the provision of content and conceptual material in both written and spoken form, allowing it to be questioned, unpacked and explored through critical dialogue in the f2f and online contexts.

Ramsden's second principle of effective teaching in universities is that of demonstrating concern and respect for students and student learning; that is, it is considered mandatory for good teaching, and therefore essential for effective learning, that teachers are conscious and considerate of students (Ramsden, 1992, p. 97). This principle links with Ramsden's fourth, which involves ensuring that students are given clear goals and intellectual challenge. As Ramsden notes, it is important that "control over learning should reside both with the teacher and with the student" (Ramsden, 1992, p. 100). In the teaching model developed in this project, a number of key approaches are central to implementing these two principles. All of the approaches centre on explicit and personal communication with students. The first is the use of the conversational framework, referred to above, for teaching and interaction in the unit. The second approach is the strategic use of student consultation and negotiation processes to demonstrate concern for the students' contexts and needs, and to allow them to articulate in their own words what these are. From this point learning goals can be understood in a collaborative context and the learning experience, within the developed overarching pedagogical framework, can be tailored to respond explicitly to student circumstances. In this project a formal evaluation was conducted in Week 8, however informal qualitative evaluations were conducted in class in Weeks 1 and 4 also. Student requests in the negotiation process were not always agreed to, but they were always responded to, and where the incorporation of requests was not possible, this was discussed and explained.

The third principle of good teaching in tertiary environments, according to Ramsden, is that of providing appropriate assessment and feedback. Ramsden comments that for students, "of all the facets of good teaching that are important to them, feedback on assessed work is perhaps the most commonly mentioned" (Ramsden, 1992, p. 99). Hisham, Campton and FitzGerald (2004, p. 5) note the particular importance of providing formative feedback to students about their online learning, and of using, as was done in this model, progressive assessment throughout the semester so that students have an opportunity to improve their performance against the marking criteria. In this model the assessment was equally weighted across three tasks, the criteria for marking each was 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. The approaches to assessment adopted in the model aimed to facilitate the students' understanding of the relevance of assessment in the unit to their effective learning, to respect student choice

and perspective in designing aspects of the assessment process (Anderson, Boud, & Sampson, 1996, pp. 10–12), and to provide a sound and clear structure to how students could improve their performance in assessment.

Ramsden's fifth principle concerns the creation of a learning environment that encourages independence, control and active engagement. The basis for this principle is the support in the educational literature for cooperative learning over competitive and individualistic learning (Ramsden, 1992, p. 101). In this model, the focus on discursive, active and collaborative learning aimed to engage students with "the content of learning tasks" in a way that enabled them "to reach understanding" (Ramsden, 1992, p. 100). It also aimed to encourage students to become active-learners in their own right, thereby promoting student independence (Sheffield, 1974). In both the f2f workshops and the online discussion environment Laurillard's conversational framework formed the basis of necessitating student activity through conversation. In both environments learning became "lively, dynamic, engaging and full of life" (Cannon & Newble, 2000, p. 71). The conversational experience involved talking, reading, and thinking in the f2f workshops; and in the online context these activities were extended to conversation through writing. In the f2f environment conversations were structured, for example, using techniques such as questioning, small group activity, 'buzz groups', one to one discussion, reading, problem-solving activities, and brainstorming (Cannon & Newble, 2000, pp. 72–74). The online discussion fora focused on collaborative yet individually timed contributions that evidenced the fact that students had "more time to be reflective and provide well-thought-out answers" (Bender, 2003, p. 65) than in the f2f classroom.

The final principle identified by Ramsden is that of ensuring that teachers learn from students. As Ramsden comments, "none of the foregoing principles is sufficient for good teaching. Effective teaching refuses to take its effect on students for granted. It sees the relation between teaching and learning as problematic, uncertain, and relative. 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" (Ramsden, 1992, p. 102). The action research basis to this project and its ongoing reflective, collaborative nature has been a specific design element of the model to ensure that it is informed by, and responsive to, student needs, and that it is based on students' real experiences of learning rather than assumptions and approaches founded only on theoretical notions. The process of refining and improving the model remains ongoing, and the specific format of the model for each new semester will continue to respond to each new cohort of students, their needs and contexts.

### **Efficient learning**

What is meant in this paper by efficient learning also warrants brief elaboration. Whereas *effective* teaching and *effective* learning are directly correlated and causative, some tension can arise from the differences between what might be considered *efficient* learning from the student perspective and what might be considered *efficient* teaching from a lecturer's perspective.

Contemporary students increasingly appear to require flexibility in the conditions and requirements of their learning environment to allow them to learn efficiently. 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 discussed in this paper, can assist students to learn efficiently within the context of their complex life matrix. Students therefore want to be able to choose — to some extent at least — when, where and how they will learn. Teaching approaches that are focused only on f2f on-campus classes are inevitably limited by the static nature of the time and place in which they make learning possible. In contrast, "the online class is available 24x7" (Bender, 2003, p. 65; Salmon, 2000, p. 17). A model that integrates, therefore, flexible learning components such as the provision of 'own time' online learning and assessment, and unit content transmission through a study guide workbook, provides significant efficiency benefits to students. Efficiency for students also results from clarity, through explicit communication, about what is expected of them in terms of learning objectives, outcomes and goals and how these relate to assessment. For the many students who increasingly appear to approach their learning from an assessment driven strategic perspective, providing assessment that seeks to work positively with this perspective, possibly achieves a better context in which efficient learning is made possible for students. Where students are assisted to learn efficiently, it is arguable that the positive attitudinal impact of this will further assist with achieving effective learning.

For academics, too, the idea of efficient learning has a critical time element. In the contemporary tertiary environment we are increasingly required to teach not only well but also more efficiently. The concept of time in this context has become emotive and value-laden (Salmon, 2000, p. 43). Damoense (2003, p. 5), for example, asserts: "teaching online is more demanding than traditional face-to-face teaching, especially in terms of the time required". Institutional and government-initiated imperatives to teach 'smarter' are also related to demands that academics find more time for higher levels of research activity, as well as teach

greater numbers of students with fewer resources. In the light of seeking to achieve a wider acceptance of blended models, it is important then that some studies are starting to show that online learning opportunities are allowing for “higher student:faculty ratios to be achieved, with a satisfactory or perhaps increased learning experience” (Salmon, 2000, p. 20).

What does need to be acknowledged for teachers who are prepared to work with different learning and teaching models, however, is that “the stakes and costs of innovation are high” (Salmon, 2000, p. 89) and so attempts at new and effective approaches 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 conditions discussed in the next section of this paper aim to make this model transferable for practice by others in their teaching.

## **Favourable conditions for achieving effective and efficient learning with a blended teaching model**

The conduct of this project under the QUT Teaching Fellowship program has resulted in the identification of “certain favourable conditions” (Ramsden, 1992, p. 116) for effective and efficient learning to be possible in a blended f2f/online teaching method such as the model presented here. These conditions relate directly to, and clearly reflect, the principles of effective teaching discussed in relation to the model above.

### ***Condition 1: A commitment to best practice in, and the theoretical foundations of, effective and efficient learning in both f2f and online environments***

It is critical for the model advocated here that any practitioner of it is committed to the theory that underpins it and the notions of best practice that it represents. The conversational framework at its core, and the principles of effective teaching that inform it, require an acknowledgment that the traditional expository lecture method is no longer appropriate (Ramsden, 1992, p. 101), and that the question of what we do with our lecture time needs ongoing critical reflection, if tertiary educators are to make effective and efficient learning possible.

The aspects of best practice teaching, for both f2f and online contexts, evidenced in this model require a commitment to active student learning as the key facilitator of deep learning (Laurillard, 2002, p. 13, referring to the work of Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner, & Papert). This commitment places much more responsibility, however, with the teacher in terms of organising and achieving successful activity (Laurillard, 2002, p. 11) and of being reflective about those processes. Best practice in online environments requires, additionally, a commitment to using online technology for more than bolt-on information provision; rather for engagement and connection, and to create a scholarly community of practice in which students can participate flexibly. Online methods for learning and teaching must therefore be “viewed as a new context for learning, not just as a tool” (Salmon, 2000, p. 17).

### ***Condition 2: A reflective, considered decision to use a blended model***

Whilst “technology-supported learning environments offer many opportunities for both teachers and learners” (Oliver, 2000, p. 157), blended learning and teaching models such as the model discussed in this paper clearly do not suit all class types, student cohorts or subject domains. The decision, then, to opt for such a model of teaching delivery needs to be one that is carefully made. In this project, areas for consideration currently being developed by Wells and Field (2003) were used to make the decision as to the suitability of the unit for blended delivery. The four key areas considered were: 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.

In terms of the *nature of the student body*, consideration was given to the fact that whilst most students in the unit were enrolled internally, a significant proportion were external students. External students in the author’s School have to date experienced distance education with virtually no interactive element to their learning. Blending online delivery and assessment into the unit’s learning and teaching approach therefore had the potential to make the conversational framework possible for the external students, whilst expanding the student peer group for the internal students’ experience of that framework. The *level of study* of this unit involved second and third year undergraduate students; it was considered, therefore, that the students had reached a level of learning maturity that would support their coping with a blended learning environment with some emphasis on independent learning, especially in circumstances where the online learning component was supported by the study guide workbook and the f2f active learning sessions. In relation to the *nature of the unit material*, the theoretical focus of the unit meant that the unit was suitable for the provision of content and concepts through the study guide workbook with a blended approach providing f2f and online discussion and analysis of that content. The written, critical *nature of assessment* required by the unit objectives, and the scope to collaborate with students on both the format and marking criteria for assessment, also supported the decision to use a blended model.

**Condition 3: *Explicit communication and collaboration with students***

It is an essential condition of achieving effective and efficient learning through this model that explicit communication and collaboration with students, about both the method (the pedagogical justifications and student-centred nature of the model) and aspects of assessment design, is prioritized. In this model the first lecture is intended to be used to systematically explain the teaching approach to students, to address their concerns and queries (Campbell-Gibson, 2000, p. 157), to discuss the benefits for students in terms of efficient and effective learning outcomes, and to connect learning design to learning aims and objectives in order to create strong contexts in which unit content, learning tasks and assessment items can have a clear sense of fit and purpose (Biggs, 1999; Mager, 1975).

This approach reflects the action research nature of the project, but also seeks actively to recognise that whilst a blended method caters for a wide range of student learning styles, it also provides significant challenges to some students. Making effective learning possible in a blended environment requires communication and interaction about these challenges, and a greater focus on clarifying what is expected of students. In this model student surveys and evaluations, and the collective learning contract were used to demonstrate a commitment to communication and collaboration with the students.

Other strategies to enhance communication included extensive use of online notices and emails in which attempts were made to replicate elements of f2f communication; for example, using a clear and energetic tone, and an engaging and enthusiastic writing style (Bender, 2003, p. 53, referring to TEDI, 2000). These communication issues are important in terms of motivating students (Wlodkowski, 1999, pp. 9–10) and creating a sense of connection and community. It is also important to note that communication with students in this blended model is facilitated and enhanced by the f2f component of the unit.

**Condition 4: *Presence and interactive role of lecturer***

In both the f2f and online components of this blended model a key aspect of achieving effective and efficient learning relates to the active and involved role of the lecturer. This model is constructed around the presence of one lecturer working alone; that is, without the assistance of additional tutors or e-moderators (Salmon, 2000, p. 45). Therefore, the role of the lecturer is central to whether the model can make effective learning possible. Key roles of the lecturer in this model include communicating effectively with students (Salmon, 2000, p. 41); modeling effective approaches to learning (Bender, 2003, p. 54); facilitating and encouraging motivation (Wlodkowski, 1999; Donald, 1999, p. 27; Keller, 1987); personalising the learning experience (Bender, 2003, pp. 11, 31); and giving timely and appropriate feedback (Bender, 2003, p. 31). At the core of all these roles is a focus on attention to the student, and the encouragement and stimulation of their active learning in both the f2f classes and the online environment (Bender, 2003, pp. 12, 63).

While the importance of the lecturer's role in the facilitation of effective f2f learning activities is relatively clear, in terms of achieving effective learning in the online component of the model, the role of the lecturer takes on a particularly critical characteristic. It is significant for the online aspect of this approach that Slack, Beer, Armitt and Green (2003) found that online discussion can facilitate deep learning but only in circumstances of effective instructor facilitation and support. Salmon describes a lecturer's role in relation to online learning as being to "take control, make it good, make it real and make it worthwhile" (Salmon, 2000, p. 98). Bender warns that in online environments it is also important for the lecturer to work against deterrents for effective learning such as students feeling overwhelmed, and students facing technical difficulties (Bender, 2003, p. 31).

Of foundational importance is, of course, the design and maintenance of the online discussions (Barker, 2002; Salmon, 2003); these discussions require a strong structural design supported by a collegial environment where academic standards are modeled by the lecturer (Bender, 2003, p. 63). Further, in the online context a lecturer's provision of constructive, positive and timely feedback for students' work is of particular importance (Bender, 2003, p. 29). Also critical for achieving effective learning through online discussion, particularly where those discussions are threaded in a thematically distributed nonlinear asynchronous system, is the lecturer's role in ensuring that cohesiveness in the class, and meaningful communication, are not lost (Bender, 2003, p. 33). This requires intervention at critical points to pull together disparate strands of discussion and thought in order to mediate the learning experience (Bender, 2003, p. 33).

### **Condition 5: Using asynchronous online discussion**

The use of an asynchronous approach to the online discussion component of the model is considered important to achieving the aims of effectiveness and efficiency in student learning. It should be noted also, that particular benefits were apparent from the asynchronous discussions in this model because of the way in which they blended with the f2f component, and built on the workbook component, of the unit. Asynchronous discussion “involves a hybrid of familiar forms of communication” such 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, p. 18). This approach to online discussion can allow large groups to communicate in an orderly way (Preece, 2000) with many participants able to log on at one time (Salmon, 2000, p. 18), contributing in their own time and at their own pace. Asynchronous discussion is currently the most commonly used format for online discussion (Holmes, 2004, p. 2); and some take the view that the question is “not if, but how asynchronous e-learning systems should be used” (Hisham, Campton & FitzGerald, 2004, p. 6).

The decision to use asynchronous online discussion in the design of this model was a response to the many positive characteristics of the process that allow for effective and efficient learning. For example, asynchronous discussions can provide more egalitarian conditions for participation (Bender, 2003, p. 65), are “less intrusive than face-to-face conversations” (Salmon, 2000, p. 18) and allow students significant flexibility to make decisions about “own time” learning (Holmes, 2004, p. 2); that is, when, where and how they will participate (Salmon, 2000, p. 18). Students can therefore choose to “take their time, (and) work when they are at their best” (Bender, 2003, p. 26). They can use the opportunity for additional reflection asynchronous approaches provide before making a contribution (Holmes, 2004, p. 2), an opportunity not present in the more spontaneous f2f environment of the classroom, or in synchronous online discussion. Students can also ‘lurk’ or ‘browse’ (that is, read without contributing) (Salmon, 2000, p. 19) until they feel ready or confident to participate. Although it is possible that the public and published nature of students’ online mistakes, rudeness, or inconsistencies will be less easily forgiven than in a face-to-face setting (Salmon, 2000, p. 19), if asynchronous discussions are used to create “a forum for social bond formation” (Holmes, 2004, p. 2), as they were in this model, then a supportive learning environment develops where mistakes are allowed and expected and the exploration of ideas is encouraged. The discussions can therefore positively facilitate a collaborative approach to “the construction of new knowledge” (Holmes, 2004, p. 2).

### **Condition 6: Assessment of online discussion**

It is considered critical to the efficacy of this model that the online component of the learning and teaching method is assessed. This is because, whilst the assessment of students is a difficult aspect of effective and efficient teaching, and might even sometimes be considered “a serious and often tragic enterprise” (Ramsden, 1992, p. 181), assessment is a process of critical importance in defining student approaches to learning (Biggs, 1999), and plays a prominent role in “influencing what students learn and the scope and extent of their learning” (Oliver, 2004, p. 6). Assessment is also a tool for teachers to understand better “exactly what students know and do not know” (Ramsden, 1992, p. 182) so it can be used reflectively to improve our teaching and to make it more effective.

The decision to assess the online discussion component of the unit was based on a number of considerations, all of which were borne out by the successful nature of the online component of the model. Critically, it was considered important to use an assessment framework to demonstrate clearly to students that this activity was a positive strategy for effective and efficient student learning, and not merely an “endpoint of demonstration of performance or capability” (Oliver, 2004, p. 6). The framework was used therefore “as the servant rather than the master of the education process” (Ramsden, 1992, p. 186), and as an appropriate component of assessment design (Salmon, 2000, p. 93) in a unit where a key characteristic of student learning for 5 weeks of the semester was its flexible, online nature.

The decision to assess the online discussion component of the unit also came in part from reflection on, and response to, student feedback in the preceding years of the action research project, to the effect that students value more highly aspects of their learning that are assessed. Discussions with students in 2005 confirmed that this attitude was widely held in the student cohort, and that students receive the message from teachers that aspects of their learning are important, worthwhile and to be valued when they are assessed. In this way assessment of the online discussion was an important strategy to demonstrate to students the value and worth of the activity to their learning. It was also an important strategy in terms of encouraging student interest in and commitment to the intellectual challenge (Ramsden, 1992, p. 185) of the online learning process. Salmon’s comment that “many course designers find that assessment is the engine that drives and motivates students” (Salmon, 2000, p. 93, referring to Brown, Bull and Race, 1999) is confirmed by the experiences in this project; as is Swan’s experience of the successful motivational aspect of using compulsory assessment of an online task as encouragement and reward (Swan, 2004, p. 2).

### **Condition 7: Supporting the f2f and online environments with a study guide workbook**

The anchor of the model was the study guide workbook, which provided detailed unit content in a relatively informal, conversational style that was integrated with thinking activities, and discussion points. This workbook was available in print and online and allowed students to engage optimally with the f2f and online activities — as these contexts played only a limited role in terms of information provision.

### **Conclusion**

Tertiary institutions in Australia are increasingly assuming “more accountability for their learning programs” (Oliver, 2004, p. 5) and students paying for their higher education opportunities are increasingly demanding an education that responds to their needs and contexts. As a result, models of learning and teaching in higher education that are focused on positive student learning outcomes, and on making effective and efficient learning possible for students, are replacing traditional approaches such as expository lectures.

The blended f2f/online teaching delivery model presented in this paper, and the ‘favourable conditions’ considered necessary for its effective practice, are grounded in teaching theory whilst responding to the realities of contemporary higher education and the changing demands of our students. The reflective, action research nature of the project behind this model means that it will continue to be actively reinterpreted and developed. To this end, the author welcomes critical feedback and comment that will help maximise both the benefits to students and academics through the model.

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