

AN ONLINE MASTER'S DEGREE: TEACHING AND LEARNING STRATEGY VS. MANAGERIAL CONSTRAINTS

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Abstract

This paper illustrates the work of a course team at Southampton Solent University to establish a delivery model for an online distance master's degree. Working under the managerial constraint of ensuring that the course delivery is sustainably affordable, the focus was to develop a model that structures tutor to student engagement in such a way as to ensure the maintenance of a high standard of teaching and learning. This model is put forward as an approach that is applicable in a variety of contexts, and hence of value to course developers from other institutions investigating ways of effectively delivering online courses.

Keywords: online, distance, student engagement, learning design, instructional design, professional learners, master's degrees, delivery model

Introduction

Southampton Solent University (SSU) currently delivers one fully online distance master's degree, the MSc Shipping Operations. Collaboratively developed by a team of academics and learning technologists, with a tested teaching and learning strategy and high student satisfaction rates, the MSc has been cited as a flagship example of SSU's capacity for online course delivery. The course team embraced an unfamiliar mode of delivery and established a teaching and learning approach that created positive learning experiences for all of their students.

However, the development and early running of the course required significant staff resourcing. Managerial requirements to ensure that programme delivery fits an effective costing model made it imperative to find a way of structuring teaching delivery so that tutor time becomes manageable and comparable with classroom-based teaching hours. This work has potential high impact as the university looks to increase its delivery of online distance programmes. However, the risk has been that in reducing the number of staff hours allocated to online course delivery, we would reduce the effectiveness of the learning experience and our students' chances of successful completion.

The Solent Online Learning Standards

From 2010-12, SSU ran a Strategic Development Programme, which included a strand committing to more flexible forms of delivery. Each faculty put forward bids for developing new programmes that included some form of online learning. In response to this, the Learning Technologies department created a Flexible Delivery Development and Support Team (FDDST) with the remit of supporting these faculty projects in creating highly effective

online distance and blended learning that presented a consistent and coherent SSU-wide presentation of this mode of delivery.

The FDDST's work led to the creation of the Solent Online Learning Standards for courses that are delivered entirely or predominantly online. The SOL Standards make reference to both design and delivery elements in online courses. The development of the SOL Standards has previously been reported on (Hogg & Doig, 2012; Doig & Hogg, 2013).

Design Elements

In order to achieve a consistent SSU-branded presentation of the online learning experience, the SOL Standards require:

- A menu of fixed components appearing on all course pages
- Video-based introduction from the tutor
- Course expectations in terms of effort, duration, levels of activity and assessment methods made explicit at the outset
- Clearly signposted pathways for the learners

The choice of these factors was influenced by an informal survey of the online learning landscape carried out by the FDDST at the outset of their project. Vai and Solulski's book, *Essentials of Online Course Design: A Standards-Based Guide* (2011) and *Design for How People Learn* by Dirksen (2011) have also proved helpful in selecting design elements that help create an intuitive and effective online learning environment.

Delivery Elements

The focus on how to effectively deliver online courses led to the inclusion in the SOL Standards of elements such as:

- Knowledge building, constructive learning opportunities
- Interactive high-quality and engaging activities
- Supported, not isolated learning
- Embedded opportunities for feedback

It was recognised that a fundamental challenge of online course delivery is to ensure the constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 1999) of the online activities with the learning outcomes set by the course descriptors and the assessment methods employed. Helen Beetham (2007) put forward a learning activity design model that influenced the approach of the course team in designing activities. Similarly, Salmon's (2011) 5-stage model provided a way forward in terms of creating effectively *scaffolded* support for learners coming in to online distance learning.

Implications

The underpinning and indeed overriding implications of applying the SOL Standards are a much more consistent presentation of VLE course pages and an improved student learning experience. When moving between different units of study within a course (SSU uses the term *unit* where other institutions

may talk of a *module*), a student will be met with a recognisable page in which the key information sets are presented in the same place and in the same way. Similarly, the manner in which they work through the content of the unit will be consistent (though the academic may present differing forms of learning activity, depending on the nature of the content and the alignment of the activity to be studied). However, a further implication that cannot be ignored is that it takes a lot of time and effort to achieve course delivery that meets the SOL Standards.

The MSc Shipping Operations

The collaborative work of the FDDST with the course team of the MSc Shipping Operations led to the first fully distance online degree programme at SSU, which made full use of the SOL Standards.

The online environment is used to instruct and facilitate independent and group learning activities, which prepare the students for their online assessments (the range of assessment methods includes essays, reports, presentations, interviews and portfolio submission), which have been designed to test the learning outcomes of the unit and of the course. There is a strong emphasis on learner activity that focuses on the individual student's role within the maritime industry, such as reflection and research into students' own working context using research models and theory to critically evaluate their industry practice and to plan for their future professional roles. In this way the distance delivery also aligns with the fact that it is best utilised by those who continue to work in their industry while studying.

The vast majority of the learning activity is asynchronous, which is better suited to a geographically dispersed cohort, some of whom may spend times at sea during the course. However, there are also occasional synchronous online events such as virtual classroom sessions or live online presentations. These tend to be used only for specific events such as induction or at the onset of a new unit of study.

Challenges

Resource Intensive Development Phase

The development of the MSc Shipping Operations was highly resource intensive. There are three identified areas of work that required intense staff activity:

1. Professional development of the academic staff
2. The development of each unit of delivery
3. The actual running of the units

Professional development. The course team at the outset of the MSc Shipping Operations development was made up of senior academics in the Warsash Maritime Academy with considerable experience and expertise in developing and running courses for classroom based delivery. They recognised from the start that in order to successfully deliver online distance

learning, they would need to undertake an extended period of professional development in the principles and practices of teaching students via the VLE.

Stages in their professional development included:

1. Presentations from Learning Technologies.
A series of course team meetings were held at which learning technologists presented on the various online tools.
2. A full day workshop.
This was held so that the course team could participate in live online learning activities, gaining the experience of being an online learner.
3. One-to-one consultation.
Each course team member has ongoing one-to-one consultation with the Instructional Developer, focussing on the workflow of content presentation, learning activities and assessment within the unit.

The development of each unit. It is estimated that each unit took on average 150 hours to develop so that it was ready to run with students. There was considerable variance in this, as different members of the team had different levels of experience in using the VLE, and because different units required different styles of online course content.

The running of the unit. From the outset of the course, the lecturers were each allocated 150 hours to teach a 15-credit unit. This proved necessary in order to manage the various elements required in the role for instance:

- Facilitating online activity
- Responding to student activity in discussion forums and journals
- Monitoring student engagement and intervening when necessary
- Responding to direct enquiries from students
- Maintaining the VLE pages

Consistently in the early iterations of the MSc, the units were taught by those academics that acted as the subject matter experts (SMEs) and developed the unit in its original form, thus having an intimate understanding of the structure and rationale of the unit. These were all senior or principle lecturing staff, thus increasing the cost of running each unit.

Bringing the Course in Line with Traditional Course Delivery

From a management perspective, the resources put into developing the MSc Shipping Operations, as described above, were worthwhile as a loss leader. It was viewed as sound investment in order to create a high-quality course provision that would be attractive to professional people within the maritime industry and would retain its students until successful completion of the course. Further, the MSc has been treated very much as a flagship course within SSU for online course delivery regularly cited by senior management as one of the successful outcomes of the Strategic Development Programme.

However, the reality of running a course in a modern HE institution is that in order to be sustainable, the course must become profitable – or at least break even – within a few years of its inception. Despite the considerable reduction in on-costs of delivering a course via the Internet, it was still the case that the number of lecturer hours allocated to the teaching of the MSc was causing the course to be running at a loss, and that it would continue to do so even with the student numbers running at a per-tutor capacity.

In the 2014/15 academic year, the decision was made to bring the hour allocation on the MSc in line with that given to teaching on units taught on campus. For each 15-credit unit, the teaching staff are allocated 30 hours to teach, a reduction to a fifth of the previous teaching hours. Hence, each lecturer has considerably less time to split between the support of the students, facilitation of online activity, and the grading and feedback on assessments.

From a course team point of view this created a very immediate risk of losing the level of engagement with and support for the students that had been provided up to this time. Maintaining student engagement was already recognised as challenging.

A New Delivery Model

In the original service level agreement (SLA), the lecturers committed to respond to email within 24 hours and all forum or journal posts within 48 hours in the working week. The amount of time spent on replying to students is greatly impacted by the size and activity level of the cohort (up to a maximum of 30 per academic); it is our experience that some cohorts are considerably more active in the online activities than others. It was recognised that this manner of engagement was a key factor that increased the amount of time the academics spent on teaching.

The Staff Workflow

In recognition of this, the Instructional Developer collaborating with the course team proposed a new model for engagement, which is gradually being brought into place in the 2014/15 presentation, and will be fully in use across all units, along with a new SLA, in the 2015/16 presentation. The key to this model is structured *events* occurring across the duration of the unit. These are the points at which the tutor will provide feedback on student work. This student work can either be of individual nature (usually postings into the online reflective journal) or student-to-student collaborative or discursive tasks.

If a unit is of 15 credits, and hence 30 hours of teaching allocation, it is presumed that the tutor would commit to 5 hours of feedback and interaction with students on each online learning event. Hence, a likely pattern of engagement would involve providing feedback on three individual tasks (reflective journal) and three student-to-student tasks to make up the teaching hours. The way that the tutor's work sits as a workflow across the unit is illustrated in Figure 1.

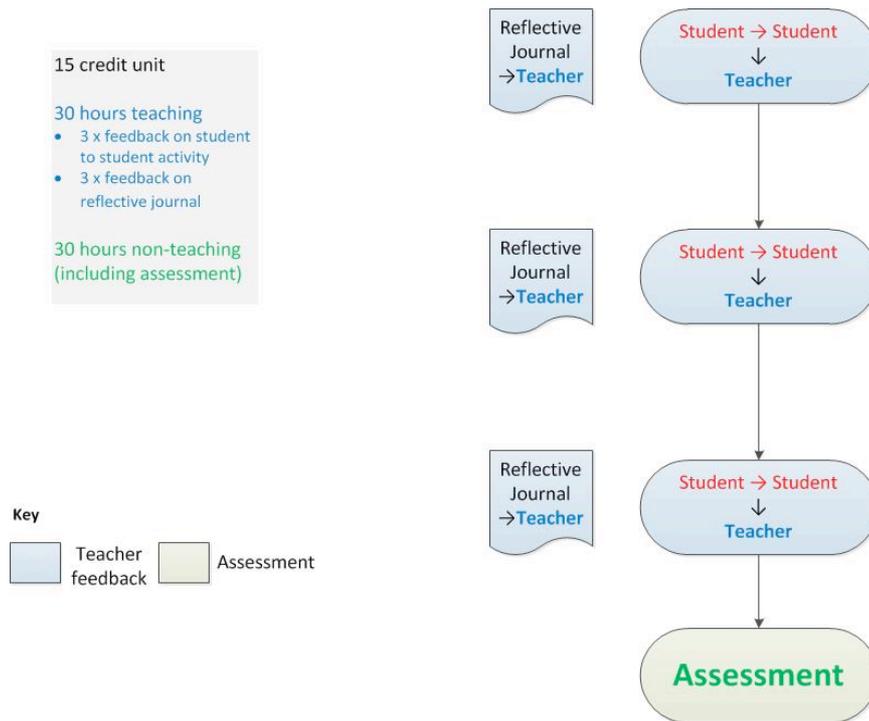


Figure 1. The staff workflow.

Figure 1 is indicative, and not exclusive; it may be that there are multiple points of assessment in a unit, and that the learning events correlate to these in progressive succession, or the nature of the learning events may vary from the pattern of three individual and three student-to-student tasks.

The time spent in general administration and on the grading of assessment work is seen as inherent in the 30 hours teaching allocation, in much the same way that in-class teaching is allocated to lecturers with the assumption that an equivalent number of hours will be spent in non-teaching duties.

One advantage of a structured model like this is that it allows the academics teaching the online units the ability to plan the dates and times of their interactions, rather than this being an open-ended contract to provide feedback and support as and when the students contribute to any of the online activities. The descriptor and syllabus of the unit can be written to make explicit where in the learning process these learning events will occur. They can be attached to expected completion dates following which the lecturer will then provide feedback.

Further, the model suggests a direct alignment between the activities that generate feedback from the tutor and the unit assessment; each activity should help the students to gain the knowledge and skills that will enable them to successfully complete the assessment. Indeed, this new model has led to a re-evaluation of the assessment methods employed in each unit in order to address this alignment, along with the tutor’s grading workload.

The Student Workflow

It should not be assumed that these learning events are the only learning activities that the students participate in while studying a unit run in this way. The model also puts forward a structured approach to learner activity that occurs independently, or with communication or collaboration with peers, but does not generate feedback from the tutor. Indeed, the underlying concept of the model is that the students will work independently towards the demonstration of knowledge or skill development that occurs in the learning events. Figure 2 illustrates an example of how the students’ workflow may develop towards the learning events gaining tutor feedback.

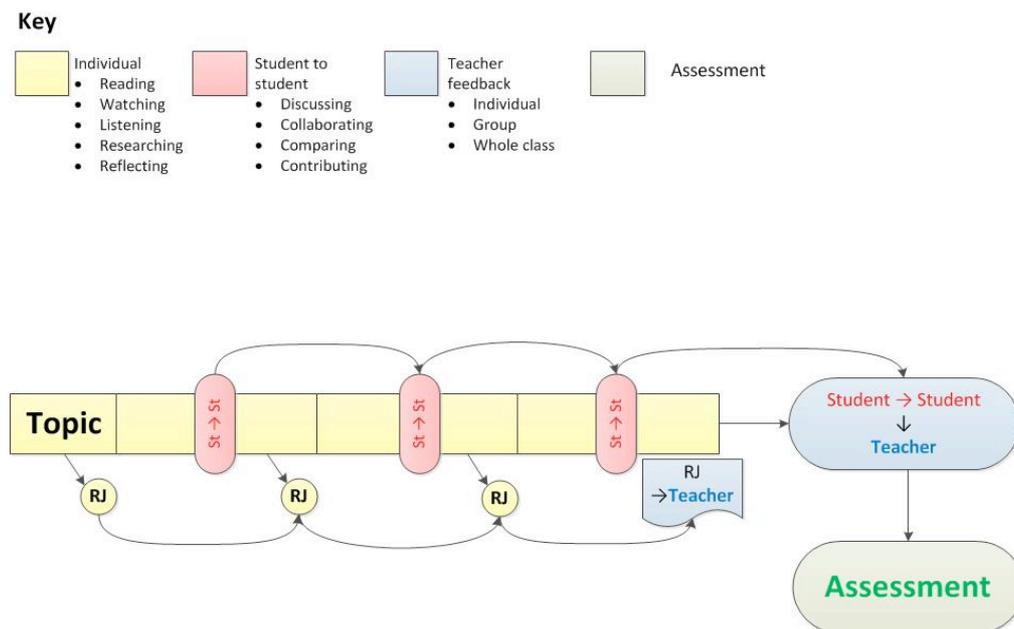


Figure 2. The student workflow.

Note that the reflective journal (RJ) posts are intended to be accumulative towards the post that the lecturer then provides feedback on. Similarly, the instructional content of the unit will guide the students towards participating in discussions or collaborations with their peers that will culminate in the production task that allows the tutor to provide feedback on their work. The outcomes of the student-to-student work may be posted individually for feedback, or may be the product of group or whole class collaboration. It is down to the tutor to design the learning activities and provide instructions in such a way as to make clear what type of output students are expected to provide and what aspects of this activity they will receive feedback on.

The Combined Staff and Student Workflow

An example of how the staff and student workflows illustrated in Figures 1 and 2 may combine into a workflow for an entire unit is provided in Figure 3:

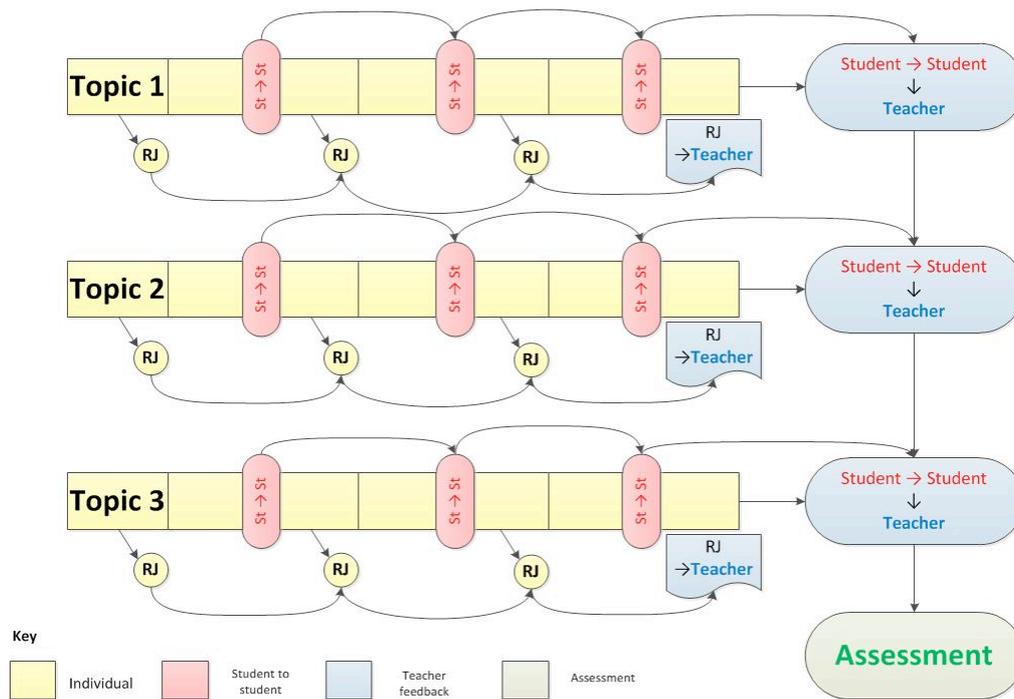


Figure 3. The overall workflow.

Given that the units are now being developed or redeveloped in such a way as to build a detailed structure around the expected workflow, it is important that this structure is made explicit to the students. This sets clear expectations of the amount of effort the students need to put in to successful completion of the unit, and also of the amount of input they should expect from their tutor.

This model also then allows for a new service level agreement (SLA) that informs the students exactly how much of an interaction with their tutor they can expect in each unit. The new SLA will be put into place at the induction of the 2015/16 cohort of students on the MSc Shipping Operations. Usefully, this SLA will also make explicit the expectation on the course team’s part that in order to get meaningful input from their tutors, the students will need to actively participate in the work of the unit, and will need to contribute to learning activities in order to get formative feedback on their performance. The clear pattern of student activity also allows a means of monitoring student participation and timing interventions for non-participation. In this way, the model of learning events replicates or replaces the attendance that would be an indicator of student engagement or non-engagement in an on-campus course.

A further advantage of the new delivery model is that each unit has an established and declared pattern of interactions, making it easier for tutors other than the SMEs to teach these units. This is important. As the popularity of the course grows and student numbers increase, more lecturers need to be recruited to teach in this online distance manner. In cold financial terms, the successful implementation of this model of delivery will mean that less expensive teaching staff may be utilised.

Conclusion

The initial driver for the development of this new model of tutor to student engagement in online distance courses was the introduction of a managerial constraint in the number of teaching hours allocated to the tutor on each unit of study. Hence, the model was developed in order to make a clear definition and restriction on the number of hours the tutor commits to teaching online distance units. However, in developing the model, the course team have identified other benefits that they believe will contribute positively to the learning experience and outcomes of their students.

First of all, this formalised structure makes explicit the expectation of the amount of work needing to be carried out on the unit, not only of the academic tutor, but also of the individual student. In this way it will form a declared contract between the student and the university that will help in terms of monitoring individual student engagement and hopefully provide the opportunity for intervention. It is hoped that this will improve the learning engagement of the whole cohort. Where in the past, the most motivated and time-sufficient students would contribute actively to the ongoing learning activity throughout the unit, there is now a more level playing field of clear points of contribution that all students can strive to complete, with the knowledge that their efforts will lead to formative feedback from the tutor, and that this will help them towards successful completion of the unit assessment. Those students who have the time and motivation to carry out extended work will have the opportunity to carry out tasks that are identified as independent or collaborative work that does not elicit direct feedback from the tutor.

The impact of these innovations will need to be monitored and evaluated as they are implemented. This will be done by monitoring learner engagement, completion and success rates in comparison to previous years, as well as through collecting feedback from students on their experience of the learning journey, with a particular focus on the sufficiency of engagement with their lecturers. The course team will also take part in a reflective process of considering and discussing whether application of the model does allow for the control over teaching hours that it is intended to create.

The method of engagement between online tutors and their students outlined in this paper is in no way discipline or institution specific. It is hoped that those academics who are currently teaching in online contexts may find this a useful comparison to the methods they employ in teaching their distance courses; more particularly it is proposed that the re-application of this model in other contexts may allow those who are new to online teaching a structured approach to developing new courses for distance learning.

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