

# **CHANGES FACING HIGHER EDUCATION — OPPORTUNITY OR CHALLENGE? EXPLORING ALTERNATIVE LEARNING & TEACHING PRACTICES FOR UNDERGRADUATES**

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## **Abstract**

This paper acknowledges that Higher Education Institutions are facing interesting but challenging times ahead. As with many other business enterprises, in the private and public sectors, each Vice Chancellor will be looking for improvement and efficiency savings while being seen to offer value for money and maintain quality of provision. This paper identifies the reasons why this is an opportunity to bring about change to undergraduate programmes, explores the pedagogical structures tried by others, and demonstrates how new technologies can be integrated to bring about the desired effect of promoting independent enquiry and development of the associated personal skills.

## **Introduction**

As a practitioner in education, I consider that my work is to improve learning, mine and that of others, and this can come from looking at ways to improve my practice. I wanted to design a module that required the students to find out the answers for themselves, demonstrated to them how to do this, supported them throughout and encouraged them to reflect on the process thus empowering them to become independent learners.

Hart (2005) advises, however, that the improvement should be a matter of influence and that change has to come from within. My intention was not to impose this change but to encourage the students to rise to their new challenge. My challenge was to find a way of achieving this.

Considering the current situation regarding the Higher Education Funding Review, the Browne Report (2010) and continuing discussions regarding tuition fees, have again brought about the belief that this is an opportunity to review current practice, to identify pedagogical strategies which can incorporate technology, and to design a curriculum that offers value for money from both the students' perspective and that of the Vice Chancellor, i.e., it achieves a balance of

*improved* contact time for the students but not necessarily an *increase* in contact time which could overreach a programme's budget.

However, the question was raised as to whether it is as simple just to desire change. Moon (2010) refers to the plethora of information on enhancing learning through technology and acknowledges that the practice still does not appear to be widespread. This is in part could be due to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) not wishing to make costly mistakes in the implementation of online learning while Cox et al. (2010) discuss the importance of being aware of the impact on university teachers' practices, the curriculum delivery and how these interrelate with the technology development. They offer an analytical framework based on two theoretical models which have been developed and used to analyze teachers' pedagogical practices as well as institutional factors which affect students' learning.

Final consideration went to the students themselves. Otting et al. (2010) reviewed the relationship between students' epistemological beliefs and conceptions of teaching and learning and found that students do recognize the importance of self-directed learning.

HEIs also routinely ask their students for feedback. In Brighton, their voice was raised through their course representatives and through the UK's annual National Student Survey (2010), and indicated that they would prefer to have more contact time with their lecturers. Given the likely increase in fees, this request should not perhaps go unheeded.

## Research Questions

The main objectives for this research were:

- to identify the pedagogies and pedagogical strategies that could incorporate technology into the Level 4 undergraduate business programme;
- to identify which technologies would best suit the subject being delivered;
- to judge the amount of guidance to give to the students regarding independent enquiry — identifying how much information to provide and in what format, at what point to step in and for how long to step back;
- to identify what skills the students could be expected to have, how they would identify the skills that needed development and opportunities for these skills to be developed/monitored; and

- to identify how far would this empower the students to be independent learners.

It was also apparent that both the students and I also needed to know what our respective roles would be and for me when it would change from being the provider of information to facilitator supporting them through various learning activities.

The results of this project will form the basis of the longer term objective which is to change the structure and content of the whole programme from that currently offered to this cohort of Business Students.

## **Research Methods**

The original research into change was initiated during the academic year 2008/09 through action research because of my concern that a module offered early in the business programme, which was given as traditional lecture, was too focused on me as disseminator of information and did not provide enough opportunities for the students to develop their own learning strategies.

Mellor (1998) claims that:

In action research the *process* itself is the methodology and is experimental, requiring a certain degree of entrepreneurialism as the practitioner will need to try multiple innovative ways until they find one that is suitable.

It was this definition that persuaded me that action research at this time would be appropriate, bringing about a change in my practice which would ultimately bring about a change in how the students would approach their learning.

### **Investment of Time**

This time was spent researching what technology was generally accessible, if it was available within the Business School, how it was already being integrated, and how it could be used in the module in context. The Level 5 cohort of 2009/10 agreed to participate in a trial of some new technology which provided the opportunity to observe their reaction to and interaction with the technology, identify the need for an induction period and some of the support which would be required subsequently. Attention then turned to the pedagogical strategies that already incorporated technology and a review of the literature in particular for blended and e-learning.

### **Participants**

During semester one of this academic year 2010/2011, the module in context was offered to a new cohort, but this time with the introduction of blended learning.

The module is entitled Business Environment (BE) and as one of the L4 modules to the Foundation Degree in Business (FdA Business) it provides the scope to enable students to understand the environment around them and its effect on the business world generally. There is therefore, an element of current affairs which I felt lent itself to independent enquiry by the students. I recognized however, that they would need some guidance in identifying the theory associated and this module could be the opportunity I was looking for to demonstrate to the students how to seek information for themselves, interpret it in a given situation and apply it.

I reviewed my lecture notes from previous sessions and produced a series of e-lectures which were available to the students in a variety of formats from pod casts to e-lectures through PowerPoint. They were released to the students from the beginning of the semester along with a full schedule and the instructions were for the students to listen to each e-lecture during the week prior to the seminar session. During the seminar session the students were divided into groups — at the start of the year I organized the groups but as the semester progressed, they chose their groups. Each group then received a different scenario or problem and set of questions based on the topic of the week, their task was to investigate current affairs news items relevant to the topic and then to explain how the theory supported or otherwise their interpretation of events and possible courses of action. Each group presented back to the main group and invited discussions and questions.

During the first week of the semester I ensured that the students were able to locate and download the e-lectures and were aware of what was required of them. During subsequent weeks, I observed the students' behaviour within the groups, their development of the theory and the level of attendance to each seminar.

Evaluation of the module was obtained by issuing a questionnaire to each participant asking how and if this met their expectations of University lectures and what specifically they enjoyed about it. This questionnaire had originally been issued to the L4 cohort of 2008/09 and their responses together with my evaluation had prompted the change in the delivery but not the curriculum content.

## **The Pedagogical Strategies**

A review of the students' evaluation from the 2008/09 cohort revealed that the majority of students expected to find their lectures delivered in large theatres via PowerPoint to lots of students with no interaction. They liked the content of the BE module, comments received included that it was "a good introduction" or it "instilled confidence as it refreshed their memory." They liked the structure and delivery and felt that the lecture was easy to understand. They did like the

opportunities for group work and research but would have liked more such activities.

This was, however, countered by comments (sometimes from the same students) that occasionally they felt bombarded by the information, did not always understand what was being discussed, or did not feel stretched or able to develop own self.

It has already been determined that the subject matter was thought to be suitable for an alternative teaching strategy and in fact would benefit from such.

The feedback received from the trial of new technology indicated that the students (L5 2009/10 cohort) were open to using technology but the observation showed that the students had to be familiar with the system beforehand in order to get the best from it. Carefully planned induction sessions would be required before introducing any technology.

### **Problem Based Learning (PBL)**

Taking the view that this could be an opportunity for a complete change, one of the alternative strategies identified was PBL. PBL requires the students to work in groups to resolve a problem by managing their own learning process and deciding what information they will need as well as the skills they will have to develop. It therefore indicates that each student will require a certain amount of skills and knowledge gained from previous experience which will then be applied to activities devised from problems usually originated from professional practice.

One consideration was whether the content of the BE Module needed to be modified in any way in order to benefit fully from this method. Or would the fact that each week introduced a new topic be sufficient, particularly for a module offered so early in the programme. Lee et al. (2010, p. 556) also advise that PBL is well suited to help students to become active learners and that it makes students responsible for their own learning. However, Parrott (2009, p. 14) warns that the first year at undergraduate level represents a major challenge for students. Therefore should this module support their transition period rather than hand over the sole responsibility for learning to the students at this stage? The study by Otting et al. (2010) into students' epistemological beliefs and the relationship to the conceptions of teaching learning was particularly informative as its findings showed that where students do not believe in the teachers as the main source expertise they tend to have a constructivist conception of teaching and learning and that this philosophy is in line with the principles of problem-based learning. The challenge is identifying which students hold this philosophy and how to encourage those who do not.

The next consideration is whether the integration of technology would complement PBL. Savin-Baden (2003, p. 91) describes several online models under the title of "Virtual Facilitation," one of which "Content + Support Model"

suggests a content channel for students as packages of material while tutorial support is given separately usually via e-mail or e-conferencing. However, it is generally regarded that students do not usually develop an online community and so the opportunity for collaborative learning is low in an online sense.

The theory element to the BE module this semester was indeed presented to the students as packages of information. They did have access to online discussion forums but did not actually take part in them. They collaborated in person during the working seminars.

### **Blended or E-learning**

E-learning does offer new opportunities for both educators and learners (Holmes & Gardner, 2006) and when reviewing the choice of E or blended learning, I found the literature was suggesting putting emphasis on learners to “source and create at least some course content” (Smyth, 2010, p. 4) but this from my view point was going a stage too far. While I am seeking to empower students to take control over their own learning, I was doubtful whether L4 undergraduates were ready to actually determine their own learning outcomes to that extent. Smyth continues his review of his own research (with post-graduate students) that some students will only reluctantly take to fully online work.

Research by Davies and Eynon (2009, p. 1) found that not all learners will be “digital natives” and observation of my own students has illustrated to me that they will not all be totally familiar or comfortable with interacting with IT, so expecting them to engage with a fully online module is not what I was hoping to achieve. They will be expected to use technology for their own and group learning and so development of their IT skills will be a consideration, but interaction I think is going to be preferable in a face-to-face environment.

By way of support for that decision, Wu et al. (2008, p. 1852) warn that with “virtual e-learning environments, students have to be highly motivated and responsible because all the work they do is on their own.” Even with PBL and my desire to promote a more student-centered pedagogy I am not convinced that a total online approach is going to help me achieve that. I do also have to bear in mind retention rates.

### **Resources**

Laudon and Traver (2009) advise businesses of a key lesson which is to let the business decisions drive the technology and not the other way around. This is to ensure that its technology platform will be aligned with the business and not the other way around. This view point is reiterated by Cox et al. (2010) in an educational setting when determining the technology to enhance learning: find the best that suits the subject being offered, the context in which it is offered and which can be used for the greatest advantage for that purpose without needing to change the curriculum content and goals.

However, with HEIs having already made some key decisions as to which technologies to invest in, the option for me was to start by establishing what technology was available within the Business School. We obviously had access to Web 2.0 technologies but I initially struggled to see their relevance particularly with the module that I was developing. I am not comfortable with the concepts of social networking sites on a personal level and from observations at technological conferences there is plenty of debate by academics who also consider the use of social networking sites, i.e. Facebook, for teaching or interacting with students, to be encroaching “on their space” (Smyth, 2010, p. 4).

With this in mind, I specifically asked the L4 2010/11 cohort the question: “how do you feel about using social networking sites, i.e., Facebook, for completing University work including interacting with your lecturers?” Not one reply was received in favour of using SNS in this way — the majority preferred to keep the two separate stating that the system offered was fine.

Then there was the issue of how long an induction period to offer and the skills to be developed and accessibility to the technology. It is for these reasons that I chose to make full use of the existing learning content management system (LCMS) in the Business School which is Blackboard™. Colleagues may argue that it is not the best system available and has many faults, but it is the system that the University of Brighton (UoB) have currently invested in, there is a technical team who do provide regular training sessions for staff to learn new aspects of Blackboard and so a good support structure is therefore already in place.

I can also be reasonably confident that not many of the students will be familiar with the system when they first join us, and so an early induction session, where I am able to assume the same entry level of knowledge regarding technology, can be offered to demonstrate the skills they will require in order to participate in this new learning environment. Implicit to the technology instruction is the demonstration of the purpose of the tools, i.e., the discussion forums, the repository of information, the collaboration sites and submission of assignments.

## **Defining the Roles**

As a senior lecturer I am used to designing and planning the curriculum, preparing lecture notes for presentation to large groups in the somewhat stark environment of a lecture theatre, and then meeting students in smaller numbers for seminars or workshops usually of one hour duration to offer guidance and support through tasks or case studies complementary to the lecture. The opportunities for formative feedback arise during the weekly seminars and are available to all students who choose to attend depending in some cases how much time is available and how many students are asking for guidance.

### **The Lecturer**

My role in PBL requires a transition from lecturer to facilitator but Savin-Baden (2003, p. 35) warns that this could be a challenge as it demands recognition of a loss of power and control. She continues that it is about allowing the students to “manage knowledge for themselves” and involves “letting go of decisions about what the students should learn, trusting students to learn for themselves and accepting that students will learn even if they have not been supplied with a lecture or handout.”

When searching for an alternative approach and the next development stage of this project, the programme leader and I were able to liaise with another colleague within UoB, Professor Gaynor Sadlo. Professor Sadlo runs a fully PBL programme in Occupational Therapy (Sadlo et al., 1994) and pointed out that a key issue is the design of problems which graduates are likely to encounter after university in their profession. She also advised that PBL can be a very structured process and this is how she uses it, or it can be a more diffuse or diluted way.

Each module of a UK programme is allocated a number of Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme (CATS) points which determines the number of hours of study associated with that module. The hours of study are translated as contact hours with the lecturers, self study hours and assessment hours. I used this information to assist with the change in the teaching and learning strategies for the BE module in context. I used the lecturer contact hours fully for workshops enabling me to have more time to integrate with the students, putting them into smaller groups, providing them with small scenarios and questions which they researched, interpreted and presented to the main group, while I was able to offer formative feedback. The self-study hours I “borrowed” for the dissemination of the theory. I produced the small packets of information, uploaded them to the LCMS but expected the students to download, listen and produce a portfolio of work as evidence of the theory. This portfolio is worth 30% of their overall assessment and students are permitted to take this into the exam as their “open book.” The success of this comes from the amount of work they have put into the development of the portfolio. This came about as some of the first cohort (2008/09) had advised me that they did not know where to start finding out information for themselves, were uncertain as to what was expected of them, and if they did not perceive a purpose, i.e., it was not submitted or used as assessment then there was little point in doing it.

### **The Students**

“The principle of PBL is that the students work collaboratively to identify what they need to learn in order to solve problems, they engage in self-directed learning, apply knowledge they acquire to the problems and reflect on what they have learned” (Lee et al., 2010, p. 556).

The students in this context were given the opportunity to work collaboratively when researching the information, interpreting it and presenting back and this did



require them to identify the theoretical elements of the scenario, provide definitions for the relevant theory and demonstrate how this applied to the given scenario.

Most of the students chose not to purchase the core text for this module — those who did shared the resource and all had access to the online materials.

Feedback from the L4 (2010/11) students for this specific module revealed that many were pleasantly surprised at being able to interact as much as they did with the lecturer (me), spend as much time within the sessions researching topics and working in small groups and being able to present their findings. Most expected to be in a lecture with a “slide show.” When asked how much work was done independently outside the lecture, the results varied with one student doing 5 hours a week on the theory, another spending 1 evening a week, and the majority admitting to a “fair amount but could have done more.” One student expressed a preference for more e-lectures for all modules so more practical work could be done in the lesson.

### **The Learning Points from this Research**

The requirement for change has to be either as a result of necessity (i.e., because of political or economic factors) or from a desire/willingness on the part of the practitioner to invest the time in order to bring about the change. In the current economic climate and its likely outcomes, the need to make change and to be seen to be making change is an issue that should not be ignored. Indeed, our own Vice-Chancellor is encouraging us to consider our programmes and practices and advise what, if any, changes we would like to make. Therefore, this is a chance for my colleagues and me to review what we do and practice what we preach as lecturers of business management, by finding a way to work smarter not harder.

Given the plethora of information regarding what constitutes good teaching practice, the change will require in-depth research into pedagogical strategies which may incorporate technologies and will certainly need to complement both the subject matter and the practitioner’s pedagogical beliefs. This includes a decision as to whether or how the delivery of a programme or module needs to switch from a teacher-centered delivery or a student-centered focus. Further exploration to identify diverse technologies, i.e., Web 2.0, should continue to be part of a general review of the business programme in order to keep up with industry requirements. Therefore the investment of time in order to bring about this change should not be underestimated.

An induction period needs to concentrate on the ICT skills that will be required to permit full compliance with the system, in this case the LCMS Blackboard<sup>TM</sup>. This should also include a demonstration of the purpose of the system and the expectations of the students in using this.

But how far does it fit with the principles of PBL or did it empower them to be independent learners? The end of module results for this cohort showed a significant increase on the pass rate compared to previous years. My observation of the students found that their attendance was good, they undertook the tasks willingly, and participated well within their groups. I did provide them with access to the relevant material which I disseminated only in electronic format; however, it was collated and synthesized by me. Their feedback states that overall they were pleasantly surprised at the level of interaction, enjoyed finding supporting information for themselves and their preference for the small group work when researching. As such, I believe that this module was not fully PBL but it did support their transition period from Further to Higher Education and that they had an opportunity to do so in a relatively safe environment with plenty of access to my time. This project has been about demonstrating to them how/where they can find information for themselves, i.e., removing their reliance/dependence on me for the information.

## **The Challenges**

As has already been acknowledged, Parrott (2009) advises that the first year at undergraduate level represents a major challenge as for a number of reasons a significant number of students do not successfully manage the transition from secondary to tertiary education. Given this advice, is it realistic to contemplate expecting the students to be self regulating, setting their own goals particularly at L4?

The first challenge I envisage would be to establish the students' expectations as demonstrated in the research by Otting et al. (2010) and the next step would be to manage those expectations before establishing what our expectations of them would be. Then demonstrating how these can be compatible.

To bring this about will require considerable planning of an in-depth and focused induction period for a longer period of time than is currently offered. It is envisaged that this could include input from students already well established in the University, i.e., L5 or L6, who have indicated that they wish to act as mentors or ambassadors.

It is however, recognized that this will be costly in terms of development investment — but should this be a prohibiting factor? This is a matter for each individual Vice-Chancellor and his/her Senior Management Team. It will require also each programme/course team committing to the concept of changing the curriculum in terms of delivery and probably of content — demonstrating that it does meet the requirement for “improved contact time” offering the students more opportunity to interact with the lecturers rather than just being passive receivers of their information.

## The Opportunities

Now is the right time to review and develop a new curriculum that is more student led but improves the contact time. It is anticipated that this will develop the students as independent learners by offering them a challenging curriculum where they will be able to use and enrich skills which are being requested by business and industry, as well as the higher levels of their university careers. To continue building relations between local businesses and our Institution, through invitations to participate in the knowledge dissemination and development of authentic activities based on professional problems experienced in their field of work.

## Conclusion

For me the success achieved so far has proved that now is a good time to review the programme as a whole and to change the structure and content. I will recommend to my colleagues a total redesign of the business programme to include a fully student-centered curriculum based on PBL and blended learning so giving greater responsibility to the students for their own learning.

The students did enjoy the e-lectures or pod casts depending on the format they chose to use, therefore, this can be repeated together with other functions associated with UoB's LCMS, i.e., wikis, discussion boards, group settings.

What is clear also is that this new design will require a lengthier induction period to demonstrate to the students what is expected of them and what can be expected from their lecturers.

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