Book review: Designing learning for intensive modes of study

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Abstract

Designing learning for intensive modes of study is a clear, concise guide to designing curricula with intensive modes of study. It takes a project management style approach and considers implementation at the unit, program, and institutional scale. Appendix A allows readers to explore how different intensive mode learning strategies have been designed and implemented. We see how the theory is translated into practice. Case studies bring the Guide to life and illustrate the steps to be negotiated in adopting novel approaches to learning and teaching. The key messages and plentiful illustrations currently included in vignette form in the main body of the Guide also provide how-to design excitement.

Practitioner Notes

1. Case studies give examples of preparation for study by ensuring social skills (e.g., principles of teamwork) are introduced early to adequately prepare the student for the collaborative learning.
2. Staff and student familiarity with the LMS is fundamental and needed on a *daily* (and not weekly) basis; digital learning platforms are essential, but it is important not to overload with too much knowledge or use too many new technologies.
3. Student workload and timely feedback on assessment can be supported by a variety of solutions: for example bookable meetings for one-on-one meetings and assessment structured as a series of multiple, *scaffolded, developmental tasks,* in addition to mechanisms to identify students who are struggling early.
4. Case studies reinforce the necessity of *scaffolding* demonstrated with examples across a range of disciplines and trans and interdisciplinary courses.
5. Peer review, reflection and *persistent monitoring and evaluation* are necessary to provide assurance to both staff and students.

Keywords

intensive modes, guidelines

Introduction

I have lectured and tutored as an honours undergraduate in universities for over 50 years. That is a lot of classes and way too many students to remember them all. But among the memories of successes and failures (and yes, there were ideas that did not work!) is the fun, the curiosity and fervent interest in designing the learning approach and delivery for those many courses and programs. A standout memory of that process is Friday afternoons spent browsing geography and planning education journals searching for ideas in teaching and learning, and the delight and satisfaction when a new possibility emerged that might just work for that cohort of students. Those of you who have picked up this publication will know what I am talking about!

It is a great pleasure and privilege to be asked to review this publication on *Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study*.

The Value of a "Go-To" Learning Resource

The value of a go-to resource does not seem to have gone out of fashion. Available in both hard or digital format, the idea of having access to a guide, a template, case studies and exemplars does not seem to have dated. Guides are useful. As an example, one of the mainstays in my collection of learning and teaching resources is a Canadian publication on work integrated learning (WIL) (Higher Education Quality Council of Ontario, 2016). It has everything I need: the background theory, types of WIL, pros and cons, and loads of case studies and examples. I still use it frequently and share it with colleagues – a lot.

Authored by Samarawickrema, Cleary, Male and McCluskey, *Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study* was published in 2022 by the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), Australasia's scholarly society committed to the advancement of higher and tertiary education. Published as part of the HERDSA Guide series, it performs a similar role for both the new and experienced teacher/learning facilitator. Like my WIL document, *Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study* tackles a significant and for many an emerging shift in approaches to learning. In this instance, it moves away from traditional semester-long approaches, and, like my WIL resource, providing the reader with a useful introduction to intensive modes of study and explanations of differences in approach and structure.

Figure 1

Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study
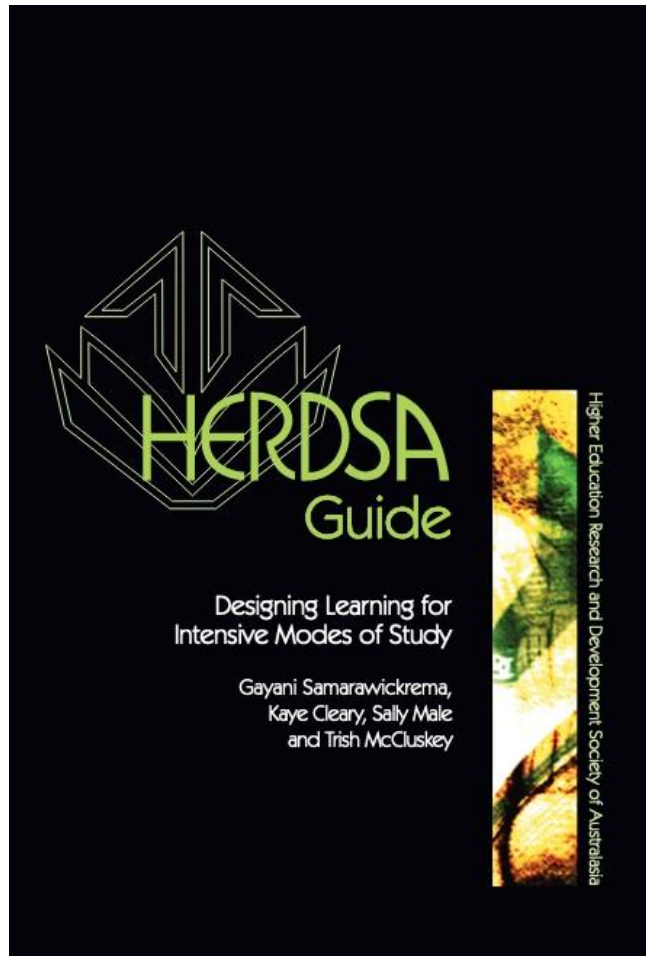
My introduction to learning via intensive mode was personal: in the deep end and immersed in a 10-day intensive at an American Ivy League university with a formidable group of fellow students drawn from amazing workplaces around the world. And I loved it. However, a few years later this experience was followed by a growing awareness that intensive mode, requiring immersion, collaboration, and learning from and with fellow students, was potentially less overwhelming for first time higher education learners than balancing several semester long units. The value of this publication is that it outlines all the settings and environments where intensive modes of study have been and could be adopted. In my view, this is a good place to start as it allows the reader to consider the range of possibilities and in that vein this publication continues to deliver.

This publication is primarily a guide – a succinct, annotated checklist. The reader is taken through a step-by-step process for key decision points in learning design. The authors have painstakingly documented prompts, advice, tasks, reminders, and ideas for policy and procedures pertinent to the design, adoption, and implementation of learning for intensive modes of study. The practical approach adopted is supported by key message summaries, illustrations, and vignettes – 19 in total – drawn from seven case studies located in Appendix A in the Guide. These case studies range from a single unit of study to a whole-of-institution approach.

Just mentioning to colleagues that I had been asked to review a publication with a focus on intensive modes of study has elicited responses like "please let me know when it goes live or is released."

Getting the Basics Sorted

Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study gets off to a good start by ensuing the reader is across the key terms adopted in the document. It alerts readers, most particularly, those new to learning and teaching, to the fundamental building blocks required of all curriculum design. It is so pleasing to see terms such as constructive alignment, teaching presence, transition pedagogy, and threshold learning, included with useful definitions in the Guide's Glossary of Terms.

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I would recommend the addition of three more terms, each of which are core to curriculum design and essential for well-designed intensive mode: scaffolding, and, having included teaching presence, include also social presence and cognitive presence, given that learning in intensive mode is often highly collaborative and frequently structured around a community of inquiry approach.

Rationale and Reassurance

The essential characteristics of intensive study mode are well summarised in Table 1 on page 2 of the Guide. The various terms used in this context, such as block mode and intensive mode, might also be included given the different nomenclature adopted across institutions. The rationale and reasons for the adoption of intensive mode are included in the Guide, as is a discussion on study duration. This is useful as volume of learning is often tricky, and it is helpful to include basic duration descriptors adopted for intensive modes of study. It directs curriculum designers to meet standards while successfully addressing desired learning outcomes.

This tone of reassurance as to the efficacy of intensive study mode continues when the authors refer to the history of the approach. And while adopted more frequently for postgraduate studies, attention is then directed to recent examples of intensive modes adopted at the undergraduate level and across a wider spectrum of discipline areas.

Overall, Section 1 (pp.1-4) provides a useful overview and prepares the reader for the following more detailed sections.

Preparation and The Art of Gathering

> *Gatherings crackle and flourish when real thought goes into them, when (often invisible) structure is baked into them, and when a host has the curiosity, willingness, and generosity of spirit to try. (*Parker, 2018, p. 9*)*

In her book *The Art of Gathering,* Priya Parker alludes to her experience in the opening session of a course she attended at the John F. Kennedy School of Government, the school of public policy and government of Harvard University. A decade ago, in 2013, I too undertook that course, and to this day that opening preparatory session similarly stirs me, and I share it often as my best "learning moment" ever. While a welcoming opening session, it was simultaneously provocative and decidedly challenging and certainly gave all participants an indication that the days ahead would be heady and demanding work. Effective learning preparation is important, and for intensive modes of study, preparation is everything, a point clearly not lost on the John F. Kennedy School.

The authors take a very pragmatic approach to preparation in *Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study* noting the importance of aligning intensive study modes with the requirements of an institution's Academic Board, its approval processes, its staff and students, as well as the institution's administrative systems, policies, and protocols. Drawing on practical examples and individual experiences, the authors highlight that learning is situated within an ecosystem. Through a summary of key design steps (Illustration 2, p. 9) and planning and preparation criteria (e.g., Table 2, p. 8) the reader is alerted to potential pitfalls. This is just one more example of the timely advice that is the hallmark of this Guide.

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The authors also stress that intensive modes of study are not merely a repackaging of "the existing traditional offer" (p. 8). Rather, as the section on pedagogy demonstrates, intensive mode requires purposefully designed learning strategies and learning environments (Illustration 3, p. 11). Several illustrations in this section of the Guide refer to case studies. Six of these cases are from a different institution and a different discipline area, providing a rich source of perspectives for the reader.

But the authors are also fully aware that preparation goes beyond planning and systems infrastructure. They stress that the intensive study experience requires an early and more immediate engagement with learning. Mindful of these considerations the authors provide ideas and guidance for preparation for both students and staff. For example, Illustration 4, p. 13 sets out several ideas for preparing students to learn intensively and in the spirit of the art of gathering it is pleasing to note how most of the case studies include examples of preparatory material, activities and experiences, and ways in which curiosity and early engagement might be designed and structured.

Getting to the Heart of the Matter

While preparation and institutional support are important, at its heart learning is enabled by learning and teaching strategies and effective assessment. In recognition of this point Sections 3 and 4 of *Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study* explicitly deal with these issues. Throughout the document reference is made to the pedagogy underpinning intensive mode study, in particular, core concepts of collaboration, interaction, communal learning, and constructive feedback. In the sections on learning and teaching strategies (pp. 15-27) and assessment (pp. 29-36), the reader is afforded an opportunity to see how these can be embedded into intensive mode curriculum and delivery. This is welcome.

The authors document that intensive modes of study have been around for some time and adopted by highly prestigious organisations. Nevertheless, scepticism still exists. This is highlighted in the Guide by noting that critique mostly centres on the lowering of academic standards, superficial treatment of content, and learner fatigue. In recognition of these concerns the Guide details six useful strategies designed to optimise learning and teaching and, importantly, get the learner off to a strong start.

Having faced these kinds of academic scepticism and wariness, it is pleasing to see the Guide acknowledges and addresses these concerns up front. Along with transition strategies (see Table 3, p. 16), and the examples of boosting learner support and front loading, the Guide includes a raft of practical pointers on scaffolding, creating meaningful activities (e.g., Illustration 6, p. 18), metacognition, and experiential and collaborative learning. All of these are designed to assist staff to optimise teaching and learning and enable students to engage effectively. In that vein, the authors are also mindful that intensive modes need careful planning, alerting the reader to potential issues in managing student workloads and expectations.

In a similar fashion, Section 4 on assessment (pp. 29-36) outlines key strategies and actions to ensure effective and appropriate assessment for intensive modes of study. Rather than *feedback,* the authors refer to *feedforward*. Acknowledging the shorter time frames, the need for both student and teacher to monitor performance regularly and consistently (this may be daily in some

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cases) is stressed. In my view, this is sensible and logical thinking, but something that is often missed or neglected.

In a similar fashion to learning and teaching, the Guide includes key steps in the design of assessment summarised in a handy, four-point checklist (p. 84), derived from lessons learned from Victoria University's whole-of-institution experience with their intensive model. Features of student-centred authentic assessment should:

- include variety
- be scaffolded
- be career relevant, and
- be efficient.

All straightforward points, but equally a handy checklist to include in one's journal of useful ideas!

The Value of Case Studies

Overall, this is a useful guide on the Do's and Don'ts in adopting intensive modes of study. What is especially useful is that it takes a project management style approach and considers implementation at the unit, program, and institutional scale. *Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study* is clear, concise, and well set out.

But the real value add comes in Appendix A (pp. 55-85) because it is here that we can really explore how different intensive mode learning strategies have been designed and implemented. We can see how the theory is translated into practice. And rather than browsing those library shelves on a Friday afternoon, we find packed into these case studies a rich array of ways of doing.

It is the case studies which bring the Guide to life and a shame that they are included as an appendix and not more readily visible in the core document. Because, while we all need reminding of the steps to be negotiated in adopting novel approaches to learning and teaching, it is the discovery of that next good idea that can be adapted to that learning situation that we are responsible for, that lights the fire within us. And these case studies certainly do that. That said, it is acknowledged that the key messages and plentiful illustrations currently included in vignette form in the main body of the Guide do provide how-to design excitement.

There is a myriad of great take-home pointers to be gleaned from the case studies:

- Echoing the point made about *Preparation and the art of gathering*, the focus on *Before & Beyond* and the *Welcome Pack* offered to all commencing students in the Juris Doctor program at UWA offer practical ideas to get students started early.
- Other case studies also give examples of preparation for study by ensuring social skills (e.g., principles of teamwork) are introduced early to adequately prepare the student for the collaborative learning.
- The case studies reveal that staff and student familiarity with the LMS is fundamental and needed on a *daily* (and not weekly) basis, that digital learning platforms are essential, but it is important not to overload with too much knowledge or use too many new technologies.
- Almost all the case studies identify student workload and timely feedback on assessment as critical issues, offering a variety of solutions like bookable meetings for one-on-one

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meetings and assessment structured as a series of multiple, scaffolded, developmental tasks, in addition to mechanisms to identify students who are struggling early.

- Overwhelmingly, the case studies are underpinned by pedagogy based on collaborative learning, students becoming the producers of knowledge and provocations and activities designed to build the capacity to engage with uncertainty.
- The case studies consistently reinforce the necessity of scaffolding, demonstrated with examples across a range of disciplines and trans and interdisciplinary courses.
- And it is understood that as with all learning and teaching peer review, reflection and persistent monitoring and evaluation are necessary to provide assurance to both staff and students.

Equally, as with any contemporary approach to learning design, the Guide includes a recognition that assessment be authentic, that it reflects professional practice, and, where appropriate, is in the workplace. Beyond discipline knowledge, the Guide highlights (see Illustration 13, p. 33) the importance of real-world tasks, professional practice, and conduct – elements of great learning design and essential that they appear early in intensive modes of study.

It All Comes Together as a Useful Guide

And so, I return to where I began, in the search for new and interesting ideas for curriculum design. Ideas that not only excite me but also evoke the very best response with and for students. *Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study* is just the beginning, albeit an especially useful, practical, and down-to-earth starting point. The Guide includes seven case studies and almost twenty illustrations providing a rich array of ideas. It is both the conversation starter and the checklist. Importantly, this Guide situates the reader in good practice. But it also leaves room for the individual learning designer's own imagination.

There are additional matters which, no doubt, will be added to the Guide over time, as, inevitably, there are gaps that will be addressed as the ideas are adopted and adapted. And for great teaching practice, that is as it should be.

With this Guide now in place, I see great advantage in a follow up publication that captures the stories of practice. How have colleagues used and adapted the suggestions and pointers? What worked and why? In what ways has this Guide fostered innovation and novel ideas? Regardless of how individuals approach the Guide, either reading it from start to finish, or turning directly to topics of interest, readers will be in a good position to enhance their own practice, feel confident in meeting external and internal sector standards, and enjoy the process. Within a sound framework like this anything is possible.

And while I may no longer be in that library browsing the journals, I will continue to search out those exciting ideas and, informed by the good guide to *Designing Learning for Intensive Modes of Study*, be able to enhance my practice, have fun, and hopefully engage my students in meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences.

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