



## Challenging Perceptions of Blended Learning in an Adverse Learning Context

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The Christchurch earthquakes of 22 February 2011 initiated an extraordinary process of professional development which informed and consolidated changes to the pedagogy and practices of three teacher educators. The fast-tracking of technical capacity led to a questioning of beliefs around effective tertiary teaching pedagogy. The resulting changes to blended learning practices enabled learning to continue during a time of natural disaster. This poster is of particular relevance to those involved in teaching in a blended learning context, focused on developing equitable online learning experiences that engage and motivate all learners.

**Keywords:** blended learning, tertiary teaching, professional development, pedagogy

### Context

The University of Canterbury, College of Education has an established reputation for distance education and a tradition of offering open and blended tertiary programmes. In 2010 *Learn* (Moodle) was adopted as the University's learning management system. While the move to *Learn* is still very much in its early phase, implementation has been enhanced by staff's prior knowledge and experiences in blended learning and their willingness to engage with professional development opportunities. Across the institution, the use of *Learn* has varied. Some lecturers have taught courses entirely online and others have used the LMS to support face to face delivery. The three lecturers involved in this research had varied experience in distance and blended learning. All had attended workshop based professional development, consulted individually with an educational

designer, and implemented an initial offering of their course.

On February 22 2011, the second day of the academic year, a 6.3 earthquake struck. Parts of eastern and central Christchurch were badly affected and the city's infrastructure severely compromised. Repercussions from this event, coupled with continuing aftershocks radically influenced the shape of the first semester course delivery. Our focus for 2011 had been to increase engagement with students on our respective *Learn* sites. However despite a forward looking approach, planning had not included the unforeseeable inability to provide on-campus students with traditional face to face delivery. We lost access to our physical resources including offices, materials and teaching rooms. On a personal level, we were living in a state of emergency, with limited access to amenities. On a professional level, we responded by reviewing and addressing of challenges of teaching our respective courses. The aftershocks continue. We face uncertainty as we grapple with challenges and tensions which continually force us to rethink our beliefs about tertiary teaching pedagogy.

## **Responsive pedagogy and practices**

The context provided an 'opportunity' for us to produce and engage in an unplanned process of professional development. The need to rethink the blend of learning experiences offered via our *Learn* sites became apparent very quickly when we realised that all of our campus students were now effectively distance students. Our intuitive actions and responses, drawing on pedagogical understandings of what it means to teach, guide, and facilitate, have assisted in the transition campus teaching to an online context.

## **Methodology**

We reflected collaboratively to identify how we made effective teaching decisions to ensure an equitable learning experience for all students. The processes which we collectively worked through replicated some of the indicators of evidence based effective professional development models which are relevant for initial teacher education contexts. The following represent a brief synopsis of our findings as we compared and contrasted narratives to identify emerging themes and patterns (Mutch, 2005). These have been analysed within a framework of effective professional development which included; engagement with existing beliefs, using iterative cycles of reflective discourse, regard for student viewpoint and voice, use of an inquiry framework, reviewing pedagogical decisions based on the theory-praxis nexus, and challenging understandings within communities of practice (Timperley, Wilson, Barrar & Fung, 2007).

## **Aspects of an equitable blended learning experience**

The following represent blended learning practises that we embraced to support an equitable learning experience for campus students. We recognise that these practises could also enhance the learning experience of our distance students. These included:

- the presentation of online content in a manner that ensured engagement within a socio-cultural framework and which utilized a range of online teaching tools (*eg teaching within a study guide model, scaffolding using graphic organizers, Google Docs, modeling through the use of video clips, audio files, directed academic reading, diagrams, weblinks, drop boxes*)
- the scaffolding of students into blended learning (*eg a weekly structure containing a sequential 'books' structure, weekly 'News' notices, gradual release of content, use of audio files, consistent signposting through the use of text, colour, and icons*)
- the importance of an initial teacher presence and engagement to foster an effective learning community (*eg an introductory letter, responding to student posts in a timely manner*)
- ensuring course teachers were constantly aware of their roles and responsibilities in the virtual classroom. (*eg in the context of regular purposeful online interactions, timely responses to forums, letting go of the need to 'see' students, and being mindful of the importance of 'stepping back' to allow students to take responsibility for forum queries and discussion*)
- introducing, modeling, and leading the use of differentiated and asynchronous forums for a variety

of purposes (eg one course had forums for purposes that included weekly discussion on course content, assessment tasks, and a book club, and another course had forums on developing personal content knowledge, and identifying online resources)

- the development of tools and expectations which empowered students to take responsibility for their own learning. (eg optional weekly webinars which provided direct interaction and dialogue about specific course content, and timed released of assessment, measured response to forum posts)
- the establishment of a wider community of practice across disciplines enabling greater transparency and in-depth learning within a professional learning community.

A consequence of being forced to challenge the assumption that face to face delivery might be ‘better’ and more engaging from the learners’ perspective, was to incorporate a wider range of online teaching tools which we had previously not used with the on-campus cohort.

## Conclusions

On reflection, we were actively participating in a process of teacher inquiry, utilizing instructional design experts, and our own evidence based practice knowledge to support our new blend of teaching. This required a deliberate engagement with our pedagogical beliefs to ensure equity of experience across all delivery cohorts. Despite the ‘reactiveness’ of our response to this extreme situation, our actions, and subsequent reflection upon our actions, have contributed to significant and sustainable changes to the ways in which we teach, advantaging both the students and ourselves as effective tertiary educators.

## References

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