



The quality challenge: Quick fix solutions or enduring cultural changes?

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This symposium explores the quality debate in the context of a major investment in blended learning at Massey University. It outlines competing and coexisting assumptions about the nature of quality and describes the principles underpinning a Quality Enhancement Framework developed to support the implementation of a new Learning Management System (LMS). Drawing on the Massey experience the symposium identifies a number of important tensions in response to two fundamental questions: what does quality blended learning look like and how do you promote it?

Keywords: Blended learning, quality enhancement, Learning Management System, professional development

Introduction

The definition of quality in university-level education is highly contestable. In the context of blended learning the quality agenda needs to balance quick fix solutions with longer-term objectives of building a culture of continuous improvement. Institutions are faced with the dilemma of either providing staff with simple templates and training resources that answer the question of 'show me what I have to do?' or to invest in enduring professional development with less tangible results, which attempts to engage staff in quality pedagogical conversations.

Of course, the two approaches are not binary or mutually exclusive. However, the danger is that quick fix solutions may help to improve the appearance or 'look and feel' of an online environment but fail to change the underlying pedagogy and basic course architecture. Unfortunately, good intentions of helping academic staff by doing it for them or short-circuiting the design process can inadvertently stifle opportunities for meaningful dialogue. Although the right balance depends on the context, arguably, the true source of quality improvement and the goal of coherent and engaging learning designs, leading to better outcomes for learners, reside in these conversations.

This symposium explores different assumptions about the nature of quality in university-level education and identifies a number of important tensions. It discusses some of the choices institutions face in terms of promoting: (a) centrally planned vs. locally organic initiatives; (b) top down vs. bottom up approaches to innovation; (c) single vs. plural metaphors of learning; (d) do it for them vs. do it yourself models of implementation; (e) one size fits all vs. needs driven professional development; and (f) institutional quality monitoring vs. trusting individual staff to develop an exceptional and distinctive learning experience. A key question is woven through these decisions—namely, what does quality blended learning look like and how do you promote it? In exploring this question, the basic argument is that

quality is living, continuous, context specific and must be locally owned. This view is illustrated through a number of case studies that compare and contrast different support models—for better and worse.

Case Study 1 – Large programme redevelopment - Business

This case study describes an initiative to deploy the new LMS to all students in core first year papers in the Bachelor of Business Studies (BBS). The BBS attracts several thousand students and is taught internally on three campuses and by distance. The decision placed considerable pressure on both academic staff and central services to support the implementation of a new blended delivery model. From this experience, insights are offered into the challenges of managing a large programme redevelopment with strong institutional drivers.

Case Study 2 – Small programme redesign - Sociology

This case study describes the experience of staff involved in the Sociology major who made a major commitment to redesign their programme using the new etoolset. A notable feature of this innovation was the leadership of the programme leader and the way staff worked closely with a centrally employed Flexible Learning and Teaching Consultant following an iterative and dynamic approach. The rich pedagogical conversations generated by this approach are reported along with examples and key lessons from a local organically driven initiative.

Case Study 3 – Small programme redesign - Social Work

This case study describes initial efforts in the Social Work Programme to re-imagine and redesign the student experience using a new blended delivery model. It reports the challenge of supporting a group of discipline-based staff with a wide range of skills and pedagogical understandings. Particular emphasis is placed in this initiative on the first year experience and problem of retention. The importance of building trust and offering needs driven professional development are illustrated and a number of insights shared from what is still an important work in progress.

Case Study 4 – College-based Innovation - Science

This case study describes a college-based eportfolio initiative. In 2007, the College of Sciences made a decision to fund a pilot eportfolio project using an external host. The aim was to assist students on their pathways towards becoming lifelong, life-wide and self-directed learners. A number of small implementation initiatives have taken place over the past two years and the Mahara eportfolio system is now part of the University's core etoolset. The experience has helped to identify critical success factors including the importance of building ground level support.

Summary

This symposium digs beneath the surface of quality and reveals the dangers of relatively impoverished models of institutional support. It demonstrates that quick fix solutions have their place but can support an additive model of blended learning, which may be counter-productive to quality pedagogical conversations. Through the lens of several case studies the symposium illustrates how different contexts influence decisions about learning design, definitions of quality and the potential for durable and transformative innovation. A number of tensions are identified and participants are invited to reflect on the relative strengths and weaknesses of different support models. The overall aim is to promote fertile discussion about what blended learning should look like and how to promote it in different institutional contexts.

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