E-learning: Do our students want it and do we care?

Leonie Arthur, Bronwyn Beecher, Roslyn Elliott, Linda Newman
School of Education
University of Western Sydney

Early childhood courses at the University of Western Sydney are at a watershed. Program restructuring has embraced the challenges of the changing contexts of Australian early childhood education and the dynamic multicultural, multilingual, multi-aged communities of Western Sydney. These conditions have resulted in the reconceptualisation of the content and delivery of initial and continuing education for early childhood professionals at UWS. This paper will present research conducted by the early childhood staff team as they document and analyse the introduction of new courses using a blended learning approach.

Keywords: technologies for marginalised and disadvantaged

Introduction

This paper reports on part of a larger study, "Using techno-pedagogies to meet the equity challenges facing early childhood teacher education in the 21st Century", which is being conducted by Leonie Arthur, Jean Ashton, Bronwyn Beecher, Ros Elliott, Linda Newman, Roisin O'Reilly, Jen Skattebol and Christine Woodrow at the University of Western Sydney. The aim of the study is to explore new models of course delivery that will address the extreme shortage of appropriately qualified staff in early childhood settings and scaffold academic learning for students articulating to university with the Diploma of Children's Services. These students have been identified by the university as experiencing particular challenges in the transition to university, and are subject to high attrition rates. This paper reports on some of the preliminary findings of this study.

Students attending UWS come from many diverse communities characterised by wide variation in income, culture, language, educational and/work experiences and resources (Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, 2002) so they face many equity challenges. Many are likely to come from the seven most disadvantaged Sydney Local Government Areas within the UWS region according to the SEIFA index of disadvantage (ABS, 2001). These areas are identified by large numbers of people on low incomes where they engage in unskilled work or are receiving unemployment support.

Students enrolled in the Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies in 2005 participated in surveys and focus group discussions. Some of the questions included: What are the challenging aspects of undertaking study at UWS? What are the competing issues facing your study (work, family, life)? If we were to change the way we deliver our courses what suggestions would you make for multiple delivery options? How can university prepare students to undertake flexibility delivered courses and what resources do you think would be necessary?

Findings: Issues for students

One of the key aspects identified by students was financial issues. Students stated that they need to work to cover living expenses and transport costs as well as to earn money to purchase resources. Many are also involved in a balancing act as they care for family as well as work and study, and seek their own timeout (Ashton & Elliott, 2005).

The maturity, life responsibilities and work-place participation of many UWS early childhood students suggests that online learning would assist them to participate in and continue with further study. But how many UWS students are competent users of technologies? Based on general patterns in census data (ABS, 2005), UWS students are likely to have more diverse experiences with technologies than the general population. Residents in greater western Sydney generally have lower rates of computer use than residents of the Sydney Metropolitan Area (UWS, 2003). The Greater Western Sydney Regional Profile conducted by UWS in 2003 found that computer use varies across the region. Residents in the Fairfield, Auburn and Bankstown areas have much lower usage than the Sydney average. Only 30% of residents in

both the Fairfield and Bankstown local government areas used a computer in 2003 compared to 45% in the Sydney Metropolitan Area (UWS, 2003).

The data generated by the research into techno-pedagogies currently being undertaken at UWS suggests that current and potential early childhood students have varying experiences and competencies with technologies. Students who are articulating with a Diploma indicated in focus groups that they have emerging ICT skills. Some students do not engage with new information and technologies in their everyday lives and stated that they had to learn how to use a computer when they commenced university study. Others are members of the Net Generation who are experienced with the latest technologies.

International research suggests that many mature age students are not generally confident with technologies and need the support of a face-to-face environment, while younger students may be experienced with technologies yet still prefer a combination of on-campus experiential learning and online study (Brown, 2005). Net Geners like face-to-face social interactions, working in groups and feedback (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005), suggesting that it is necessary to augment online learning with on-campus experiences. Early childhood students who participated in focus groups in 2005 supported this view. They stated that they value face-to-face contact with lecturers and other students. They saw on-campus sessions as providing opportunities to engage in small group work where they can 'get ideas from others' and 'hear others' perspectives'. Students also highlighted the significance of networking and building team support. Nine of the eleven students in one focus group agreed that they "would be scared to loose face-to-face".

Conclusions: Blended learning in the early childhood course

We were quite surprised, and a little taken aback, when many of our net-generation students, considerably younger than most of us, told us strongly that they preferred face to face delivery, wanted to come to uni as a way of providing personal and physical space for themselves, and were very nervous about the introduction of e-learning. We were confronted with an ethical dilemma. Should we assert our autonomy over our students? Should we impose a maternalistic 'we know what's best for you' approach, despite their obvious concerns and very real economic and ICT experience constraints? We needed to prioritise potential benefits versus possible harms or risk of harm. We needed to maintain the faith and trust of our students if the changes were to be beneficial rather than detrimental. We needed to balance short term harm, loss or inconvenience against long term benefit.

On balance, after considerable reflection, we made an ethically based judgement that the long term benefits for our students as professionals, for the early childhood profession, and for the children and families our students would work with outweighed the short tem issues. Briefly, our rationale was supported by our knowledge that in a complex and rapidly changing globalised world it is critically important that teachers and teacher educators engage in debate, decision-making, new knowledge creation and action for change using ICTs within a heutagogical approach for lifelong learning (Ashton & Newman, in press). Our flexible and blended approach would allow us to introduce new ICT approaches along with traditional classroom interactions (Collis & Moonen, 2001). This gives students time to work and attend to life's other demands while, as Marsh (2001) suggests, increasing their learning and improving retention rates. All professionals now need to be lifelong learners and engage in "more than just education and training beyond formal schooling" (The World Bank, n.d.). In our planned lifelong learning framework, online discussion has the potential to increase learning by allowing students to interact more intimately and to engage in activity which encourages closeness (McDonald, Noakes, Stuckey & Nyrop, 2005).

We worked collaboratively with staff from the Educational Development Centre to create a learning environment that facilitates student-centred learning, provides flexibility for students, and develops students' capabilities with new technologies and multiliteracies. The new course delivery model blends that which is best done face-to-face, such as intensive and interactive workshops and group presentations, with that which is best done online, such as reflective discourse and subject content to create a more effective learning experience for students.

Universities that have been implementing online learning for many years reported that, compared to traditional face-to-face or totally online courses, blended courses that combine on-campus and online

learning are the most successful in retaining students and increasing student successes (Dziuban, Hartman & Moskal, 2004). The benefits of a blended mode of course delivery are that students have the flexibility to access learning in their own time while also being part of the wider learning community. The DEST report into first year students' university experience concluded that "maintaining a campus presence is conducive to enhancing students' engagement with the learning community" (Krause, Hartley & McInnis, 2005). Similarly, Rovai and Jordan (2004) found that a hybrid course generates stronger feelings of community than a totally online course and provides more opportunities for all students to participate in discussions than a traditional classroom where a few vocal students may dominate discussion.

Our new blended delivery model of intensive and interactive workshops with supported online activities is being introduced in stages, with the evaluation of the pilot program in 2006 being used to inform further development. The aim is to embed a combination of online and face-to-face delivery in both the Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies and the Master of Teaching (Early Childhood) so that change is at a whole course rather than just a subject level. Analysis of successful programs suggests that they involve the development of a whole course approach where there is a "collective commitment" of all staff to ongoing evaluation and quality improvement and regular assessment of the "capabilities provided by information technology" (Twigg, 2003). The potentials of technology are being used to reconceptualise aspects of course design and delivery such as assessment and professional experience. We have begun to explore the use of "technology-rich" interdisciplinary assignments, such as multimedia presentations and e-portfolios that draw together the learning from a number of units

Rather than being deliverers of information, we see academics as designers of learning environments that facilitate critical thinking. On campus sessions are supplemented with electronic learning resources. These resources include content information as well as experiences such as simulations and case studies that encourage inquiry, critical thinking and both independent and collaborative learning. Text-based internet asynchronous discussion is used to encourage reflection on issues and critical discourse as well as connectivity and collaborative learning as outlined by Garrison, Kanuka & Hawes (2002). In addition, shared on-line resources and data, dynamic work with concepts, as well as the development of collaborative learning communities is used to support learner-centred interactive learning as recommended by Ramaley and Zia (2005).

In 2006 we planned on-campus sessions to maximise benefits for students, with sessions held at key times such as prior to and at the beginning of semester and when assessments are due. We ran an intensive on-campus commencement week, which integrated specific technology skill acquisition with unit content to ensure all students had basic skills and experience in the use of online study methods. These methods included retrieval of information from library e-catalogues, accessing WebCT sites and participation in shared threaded online discussions related to key unit content questions. Technology workshops and academic literacy support were also embedded throughout the course to assist students in the development of digital literacies and academic discourse. This included workshops on academic literacies that were integrated into on-campus sessions and online materials that supported academic and technological skills. We also initiated the forming of student support networks as a strategy to promote collaborative learning in both face-to-face and online learning environments.

Students are regularly asked for feedback about their experiences of blended learning. Students' comments have been positive and at times confronting. Students appreciated the flexibility that online learning provided, with comments such as "being able to complete online work at any hour was really helpful to my study organisation and management". Some students questioned the staff monitoring and assessment of student engagement with online learning experiences and discussions, with some students wanting more weighting attached to this component while others were more focused on monitoring their own learning. One student raised the following question: "Are the learning activities for our own benefit or do we need to show we have done the work?". Students also provided advice to staff where they identified areas they believed could be improved. This included the need for more preparation to work online. Some students suggested that "We need more WebCT workshops and more input about manners and how discussions operate".

While the learning curve for both students and staff has been steep, we now feel justified that our decision for change has been an ethical one. Our flexible and blended heutagogy, using ICTs for lifelong learning, places the learner at the centre of the learning process engaging both learners and teachers in

real and deep partnership within communities of practice (Ashton & Newman, in press). Coughlan (2004) believes that collaborative knowledge creating, effected in this manner, is a deeply empowering process for all. We have implemented an ethic of care in our change process decisions and feel ethically comfortable that we have made the correct decision. We will continue to expand the number of units offered in blended mode so that both the one year Bachelor of Early Childhood Studies for the Diploma graduates and the eighteen-month Master of Teaching (Early Childhood) are both available in blended mode.

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Bionotes

Leonie Arthur, **Bronwyn Beecher**, **Roslyn Elliott** and **Linda Newman** are all lecturers in the early childhood program within the School of Education at the University of Western Sydney.

Author contact details

Leonie Arthur, University of Western Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia. Email: l.arthur@uws.edu.au.

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