Experiences of Implementing a Large-Scale Blended, Flipped Learning Project

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INTRODUCTION

Many schools, tertiary institutions, and other organisations are involved in the design of eLearning experiences, but, it is questionable whether the investment results in more engaged, knowledgeable, skilled learners (Poulova, & Simonova, 2015). Two key prevalences that influence effectiveness have been identified. The first is a set of beliefs, often unquestioned (Byham, 2007), that tend to shape overall expectations of what eLearning experiences might comprise. The second is a tendency to embark on large-scale, 'monolithic' eLearning developments (JISC, 2005). The term monolithic, in the context of software and eLearning, refers to developments that do not have separate components and are part of the same architecture (Tanenbaum, 2014). It is sometimes used as a pejorative term, referring to the fact that it is slow, if not impossible, to change anything after rollout without starting over again. Therefore, monolithic deliverables in education are problematic, in part because there is an up-front cost before any learning value is realised.

In this chapter, experiences of implementing a large blended-learning project at a tertiary institution in Aotearoa New Zealand are discussed. Tertiary education in Aotearoa New Zealand covers all post-secondary education (from certificate to PhD level) and is akin to the term Higher Education in other countries. The project (instigated at the beginning of 2012) was based on a phased rollout, with each subsequent stage being informed by the ones before. Steps included needs analysis, design, development, prototyping, refinement, and deployment. The discussion focuses on personal reflections on the two initial phases of the project from three different perspectives. The overall aim is to share contextualised experiences, to add to the knowledge base on blended learning, and to provide some general, practical recommendations.

BACKGROUND

This section provides an overview of the context and scope of the project. The project was driven by initiatives to improve student learning experiences; enhance interdisciplinary education; introduce a common semester; and develop a new Masters level course and a Professional Doctorate (Owen, & Dunham, 2015). One caveat was that technology itself would do nothing to enhance learning and teaching; as such, sound pedagogical theory and eLearning principles (Weidert, 2012) needed to be driving forces. It was also recognised that the change would impact professional identity, and therefore require flexible management and responsive processes.

The three participants in the study (two of whom are also the authors of this chapter) worked closely together on the project, and have been involved for many years with facilitation, teacher professional development (PD), and curriculum design. One has been working within the eLearn-

ing field for almost 15 years. As participants they undertook key roles, and were able to provide perspectives on, and insights into, motivations, challenges, and PD needs.

The remit was to design, develop and implement a blended, flipped approach to interdisciplinary learning. As such, the project team worked with subject matter experts, writers, and curriculum editors to redesign curricula. The design included discovery-orientated tasks that learners were encouraged to engage with prior to attending regular facilitated synchronous sessions (either face-to-face or in a webinar). Design and facilitation were flipped to focus on the learners and encourage them to find and create their own resources, as well as engage with, guide and 'teach' their peers. Prior learning could be extended by facilitators and peers - especially important in courses where students may already be working and have years of experience. Interdisciplinary learning was integrated by encouraging learners to explore from multiple practice and discipline perspectives.

As part of the change process a new centre was established in May 2014. The centre ensured a reasonable amount of autonomy, so that while the 'what' was directed by the executive team, the 'how' was more for the project team to decide. As such, they were able to, for example, trial an agile collaborative approach to writing and development. The course writing and design process, built around iterative cycles, shifted from being the sole responsibility of individual lecturers to become a team-based, collaborative and transparent approach at all levels: from writing and design, to the facilitation of the courses (Figure 1).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Two aspects are key to the design approach and implementation, and these are explored before moving into a more detailed discussion of the associated research and results.

Iterative Approach and Agility

Russell (2006, para. 16) advises that "because e-learning projects are... chaotic, it is usually best to implement a project management approach that is built for chaos." A release-based, iterative approach can address some issues that arise from chaos, especially when underpinned by an agile framework. In the context of the project referred to in this chapter, a brief comparison of the iterative approach with an alternative monolithic approach, illustrates some of the benefits (Russell, 2006):

- The iterative approach enabled a project plan to be developed for each two- to three-month phase, compared with a monolithic approach where a project plan would have been necessary for the whole initiative, which could extend over several years.
- The project started small, and had increased transparency and resiliency (Haikin, 2013).
- Each iteration was designed, developed, tested, changed in response to feedback, and rolled-out to learners. In contrast, a monolithic approach would have required the design, development, testing, and roll-out of the whole thing to learners. The iterative approach enabled learning activities and experiences to be evaluated (Hudson, 2012) and changed as needed.
- The institution was able to undertake iterations for as long as either 1) budgeted and signed off for; or 2) built into the ongoing design of programmes such that courses remained current.
- There was an ability to respond to issues as they arose and this saved "resources and, ultimately, help[ed] deliver a successful project on time and within budget" (Rouse, 2011, para. 2).

Identity and Openness to Change

In simplistic terms, there are two types of change in education: cyclical and transformative. Cyclical

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