Chapter 44
Experiences of Implementing a Large-Scale Blended, Flipped Learning Project

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ABSTRACT

In the context of ongoing global adoption of all forms of technology, e-learning has continued to evolve, informed by a growing body of research. Many schools, tertiary institutions, and other organizations are implementing a variety of e-learning initiatives, although frequently it appears the investment does not always equate to more engaged, knowledgeable, skilled learners. Tertiary education in Aotearoa, New Zealand covers all post-secondary education and is analogous to the term higher education in other countries. This chapter draws on the implementation of a large-scale blended, flipped learning project at a tertiary institution in Aotearoa, New Zealand. The project (within the Health Science faculty) was driven by a desire to improve student learning experiences and develop a common semester with a suite of interdisciplinary postgraduate qualifications. The discussion is based on personal reflections, which provide different perspectives of the initial phases, from three participants in the associated study (two of whom are also the authors of this chapter). During the project, two key prevalences were observed. The first was an ingrained set of beliefs, often unquestioned, that shaped overall expectations of what an e-learning experience might comprise. Interpretations and implications are discussed using the lens of mindsets to illustrate how beliefs of "self" fundamentally influence a person's ability to embrace—and thrive in—a period of change. The second prevalence was a familiarity with large-scale, "monolithic" e-learning developments, which translated into discomfort with an agile approach. The overall aim of this chapter is to provide sufficient detail to draw educators and administrators together to apply the recommendations offered, while providing support for "change agents," as well as those ambivalent about reform. The authors are keen to highlight how ultimately rewarding, but also emotionally and physically demanding, the implementation of reform can be for those educators on the front lines.

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 eLearning 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

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