

WHAT'S NEXT FOR BLENDED LEARNING?

An inside look at how 3 universities are evolving their blended learning strategies to drive student engagement and improve learning outcomes



The past few years has seen many universities across Australia shift towards blended learning environments, with new technologies providing the opportunity to drive student-centred learning through a mix of traditional classroom teaching methods with online tools.

And while blended learning might no longer be a new concept, in 2017 it remains prevalent as ever. Rapidly changing student cohorts coupled with technological advancements, means that educators are constantly challenged to think beyond traditional models to keep pace.

What's more, while improved student engagement and learning outcomes may be the final prize of blended learning, the most effective programs also focus on capacity building for staff in order to establish and maintain an innovative learning culture.

At the same time, measuring student engagement has progressed as a core focus for universities to understand and improve the effectiveness of their blended learning methods. Some universities are using learning analytics to monitor engagement; while others are experimenting with newer methods to personalise and measure feedback.

No matter what type of blended learning environment you have, one thing is for certain: it is an ever evolving journey that requires constant review, measurement and collaboration to ensure success.

Ahead of the **6th Annual Blended Learning Summit 2017**, we caught up with three universities to find out the specific areas each are focusing on to improve student learning outcomes by creating effective and adaptable blended learning environments.



This eBook explores:

The University of Sydney is driving institution-wide curriculum transformation through blended learning initiatives



Charles Sturt University is rolling-out a new interactive and adaptive Online Learning Model (OLM) called U!magine and how it is being used to create a connected learning experience



Monash University is using learning analytics to enhance enquiry-driven student learning



CURRICULUM TRANSFORMATION THROUGH BLENDED LEARNING THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

Established in 1850, and as Australia's oldest university, Sydney is one of the last major Australian Universities to transform their curriculum using blended learning.

With the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences leading the way by transitioning to a blended learning model over the last couple of years, the broader university is set to follow suit by transforming learning through a new Learning Management System (LMS), as well as focusing on capacity building frameworks for staff.

Below, Brian Bailey, Technology Innovation Manager at the University of Sydney, shares how the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences is spearheading learning innovation and how they plan to facilitate a culture of blended learning throughout the rest of the university to drive better student engagement.

The vision: embedding a digital learning experience

"The Faculty of Arts and Sciences (or FASS) is one of the largest faculties at Sydney University and we have our been on our own blended learning journey.

FASS has had an eLearning strategy in place since 2013. By 2016 we went from having (in some cases) little more than an electronic version of the Unit of Study outline, to having distinct blended learning features on 95% of all Blackboard sites. In the same period, we implemented digital submission of assignments from almost completely paper-based, to 95% electronic, as well as making almost all lectures available electronically through Echo360.

In late 2015, the university set out a broader overarching strategy to 2020; the two main parts are what we refer to as strategy four, to transform the entire university's undergraduate curriculum and strategy five, which involves transforming the overall student experience. Both of these elements have become a central focus now across the entire university.

For the past two years we have been consulting with students, educators and other stakeholders to realign the whole university around a new set of graduate qualities; as well as looking at how we can transform the curriculum itself through new innovative teaching practice, informed by technology.

In the modern world students obviously need the domain expertise of their area of study, but students also need very human skills such as critical thinking, collaboration, creativity, communication, and so on. The university is aiming to take the lead by reengineering everything that we do around student needs in those human-domain areas. It's a very big journey and it is a journey that is never really quite over. From a faculty point of view, we have made a lot of progress and now we are working closely with our central leadership team to deliver that same kind of approach and outcomes across the university."

Getting staff buy-in for a new type of teaching and learning

"In some ways, getting our staff on board was quite easy because teaching and learning is a strategic priority of the broader organisation, which means that staff were able to rally around and pull in the same direction.

Within our faculty itself, we have a strong tradition of innovation and we have been supporting blended learning innovations for a number of years, and also trying to push the bar in terms of education innovation practices.

We have been maintaining a program of workshops and showcases to engage our staff, which involves technologies and non-technological tools and approaches. We support all of these elements in the faculty through an academic support and development program.

Our aim has been to keep a strong focus on the people who are doing the teaching and learning. We have also been able to keep education innovation on the map and I manage a team of eLearning professionals, as well as the academic support and development team. We have been able to bind this idea of innovative teaching practices and technology in our faculty for a long period of time, through good sponsorship from the Dean and the faculty leadership group.

Blended learning has been front of mind in our faculty and some other faculties as well, but by binding it with the university strategy we are now set for university wide curriculum transformation.

Interestingly, one of the complaints both staff and students had was that Blackboard Learn was holding people back. Whether this was completely fair, I'm not sure, but it has led to real change. One of the big things the university has done in response is go to market for a new Learning Management System (LMS) and we're in the process of transitioning to Canvas. We're the third or fourth University in Australia to do this, and it is quite a bold move.

This move has got a lot of our staff very excited because while Blackboard had a lot to do with configuring things within a pre-baked learning environment, Canvas is enabling us to collaborate and contribute new ideas to improve the functionality of the new LMS."

Striking a balance between pedagogy and technology

"Finding a balance between pedagogy and technology is going to remain an open question for quite some time because there is no one approach to innovative teaching practice. The biggest mistake you could make is to try and create a 'cookie cutter'. What is really working for us is to get different groups of academics in different contexts together and providing support to those groups.

One of the things about the University of Sydney, particularly in Arts and Social Sciences, is that everybody is a critical, independent thinker. They don't want to buy into some sort of cargo cult that is all about technology. In reality, the evidence for technology providing positive outcomes in terms of education is quite mixed.

While we thought we might have a bit of a challenge, we found academics can come together to discuss issues, then it becomes more of a question of what you're saying in terms of pedagogy and the technology mix.

For example, we started facilitating storyboarding workshops. We took ideas about design thinking and looked at several different methodologies. We now have academics going back and looking really closely at the learning outcomes and the graduate qualities of their units of study. Academics as individuals and in teams are really thinking about what we are trying to achieve in terms of learning outcomes. It has been quite exciting and people have been thoroughly engaged in this.

The other big thing in terms of the technology and the pedagogy mix is that like most education institutions, we are thinking more about how we can make learning more activity-based. This includes project-based learning, and so on. Our aim is to get the fundamentals right in these areas before worrying too much about technology.

The other key learning from our experience is that academics love to learn from other academics. They certainly dislike being told what to do. For the past five years we have created an environment where academics can showcase their ideas. This provides the opportunity for staff to listen, collaborate, ask questions and try the same thing out for themselves."



Capacity building for staff

“We’re at the point where our staff are increasingly aware of new learning strategies, particularly around our LMS, which is building a desire to get engaged with technology. We have been doing a lot of showcases around videos and other tools to help staff understand the fundamentals of blended learning and also the range of different approaches they can use.

But a lot of the value we’re adding is through the areas which might not be so obvious. For example, when it comes to using video in the classroom, we are focusing on things like editing skills. We’re providing the academics with the opportunity to sit down and work with experts in the area of video production, so they can use that information to improve educational and instructional learning design.

This approach is not only helping to build the capability of staff, but also helps them to link the new approach to pedagogy. For example, questioning: what type of visual resource would work in certain circumstances?

Another area we are focusing on is on life-learning applications. Our aim is to facilitate a communication forum for academics to use themselves and it is really important from a capability-building perspective.

A big challenge for academics is evidence-driven behaviors in the classroom, because every time a new teaching method is introduced, things tend change before conclusive evidence is available. Our approach is to allow academics to take evidence-led decisions through a platform called ELLA (Enabling Lifelong Education Application) – which is like Facebook for academics.

ELLA allows academics to work in small groups, as individuals, or with partners to experiment on a prototype they would like to implement in their classroom, and they can also link it to research if they want. ELLA is then used to facilitate a learning ‘journey’ and provides the opportunity for academics to look at the results and critically reflect on how the change has played out in the classroom. It means they can approach change with more of a scientific method, and it is also really useful for them when it comes down to academic performance and development review time.

Innovation happens all the time in classrooms, but people don’t record it. ELLA helps academics to measure the impact of new learning styles on a more formal basis and make improvements in the way we are innovating learning as a university.”

ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH NEW INTERACTIVE AND ADAPTIVE ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES AT CHARLES STURT UNIVERSITY

As improvements in digital capabilities continue to evolve, universities must move beyond the traditional method of blended learning purely based for content provision, to a comprehensive engagement-oriented ecosystem for learning.

At Charles Sturt University, this is becoming a reality through the u!magine innovation unit's Online Learning Model (OLM). The OLM consists of 7 elements and makes use of online technologies to engage all stakeholders holistically to ensure a connected learning experience.

Below, Julie Lindsay, Quality Learning and Teaching Leader (Online) at Charles Sturt University, explores out the strategies being used across Charles Sturt to design and develop blended learning in order to improve the student experience and maximise learner engagement.

The vision: developing an engaging online learning environment

“Our Online Learning strategy at Charles Sturt University is based around the need to provide an engaging online environment. Our focus is on engagement and interaction and this is at the centre of everything we’re doing.

We’re particularly focused on continuing to make the shift from being a distance education provider to being an online learning provider and a champion in online learning.

Online learning has a number of different learning elements and over the past year we have developed an OLM to increase student engagement, address some of the recent attrition issues we have experienced and provide more enhanced subjects and courses.



Our OLM has seven elements, which include:

- Learning communities,
- Interaction between students,
- Teacher presence,
- Interaction with professions,
- Flexible and adaptive learning,
- Interactive Resources, and;
- E-assessment

Each of the seven elements of the OLM are designed to increase one or more types of engagement and combined together in varying degrees of intensity within the subjects making up a course. We are working on implementing these seven elements into subjects and courses.”

Creating flexible and adaptive learning through online platforms

“We are using a number of strategies to facilitate flexible learning online. We’re looking at different subjects and discussing the different elements of each subject with academics. For example, asking what are the learning outcomes? What do the academics want to see happen in their subject? Based on the feedback from these questions we can then build the types of environments and courses to facilitate these needs and outcomes.

One of the main elements we focus on all the time is establishing and fostering learning communities. This involves interactions between students and teachers and looking at how we can help teachers establish an online presence and identity, right through to being a fluent online practioner and understand emerging technologies that support online learning.

Creating flexible learning for students involves a lot of conversations with academics around the appropriateness of different online learning elements for a particular subject. It is not a one-size-fits-all. It is a flexible model which can adapt in terms of the needs of students.”

Keeping learning personalised through multi-media tools

“Our Learning Management System (LMS) Blackboard has certain limitations when it comes to creating a personalised student experience. So we’re working within the LMS, but we’re also going beyond it.

We’re scaling up the look and feel of our Blackboard interface by improving the design and presentation of our modules and working on a new discussion forum design and management within this tool.

We also have WordPress implementation happening across the University. It is called ThinkSpace and many subjects are now picking this up and using it as a blogging and journaling tool for students. This is also a tool that works in a professional context because students can export and take information away from this platform to their own WordPress website at the end of the course.

We’re also using a number of other Web 2.0 tools to provide interaction, collaboration, sharing and digital scholarships. These involve things like Twitter, Padlet, Ego, Flipgrid and VoiceThread. We are aligning these tools with the need for visibility in online learning. Tools like Flipgrid, VoiceThread and Padlet provide students with opportunities to easily post multi-media and share who they are, what they think and what resources they want to share.

It is also important to note that all these platforms can be password protected. While I tend to encourage students to make things as visible as possible, we still provide students with a choice. Some students prefer not to have work visible, so it is all part of digital censorship and digital fluency.”

Enabling students to shape their own online learning experience

“This is a big conversation in the University at the moment. Some students are telling us they just want to get the content, do the assessments, get the degree and leave when it comes to learning. Whereas other students are telling us they want to be collaborative, interact with peers and co-construct knowledge in an active, vibrant learning community.

We’re currently in a transition period where we are giving students choices to shape the type of learning experience they want. It is also important to provide opportunities for students to work with small groups. Some of our subjects have 500 students in them which can be very alienating. We’re trying to work out how we break down our learning community in smaller groups.

Some areas we are considering are: what is the best learning community size? How do we create communities within a community? How can we foster good interaction between students? This is where the understanding of the teacher presence to manage additional online tools and discussion tools is very important.”

Results so far

“We have done some research on the pilot OLM program and are still processing the results. But we have found that not all elements are equal initially. Teacher presence is a key factor in improving student engagement and that has come through very clearly in the research we have done so far.

Anecdotally I have seen teachers becoming more excited about the teaching process or academics becoming more excited about the online learning process. We are also seeing a shift and enhanced student engagement and better motivation for online learning from academics.”

ENGAGING STUDENTS IN ENQUIRY-DRIVEN LEARNING AT MONASH UNIVERSITY

The Library at Monash University has partnered with the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences to create a blended learning module based on a culture of enquiry-based learning.

Below, Barbara Yazbeck, Research and Learning Skills at Monash University shares how Monash is driving collaboration between faculty and library to enhance enquiry-driven learning and the role learning analytics plays in the process.

The vision: collaborative learning environment

“We’ve developed a Blended Learning module for second-year students in the Bachelor of Pharmacy to teach information skills in an Evidence Based Practice (EBM).

This represents a key collaboration between the Faculty of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences and the Monash University Library, recently recognised in a Faculty Teaching Citation and a Vice Chancellor’s Award.

The Library has a learning skills program, with learning skill advisors that work with their librarian counterparts and faculty to embed research and learning skills in the curriculum.

And because we take an embedded approach to skill development, we try to be involved in curriculum as much as possible. In this case, we work with the unit coordinator for Evidence Based Practice.

Two workshops—A and B—are team taught and form a major assessment for this core unit. These workshops are three-hour sessions that require significant resourcing, which can be a challenge, as we’re a small branch here at the Parkville campus.

It's vital that our teaching is embedded and timetabled into curriculum. In addition, the workshops are team-taught, with a learning skill advisor, a subject librarian, and a faculty instructor involved.

We've been involved in this unit for more than five years, culminating in the adoption of a blended learning approach three years ago. This initiative was piloted in 2013, and now exists as an online module that we use in a blended workshop model.

Challenges to establishing a culture of enquiry-based learning and practice for students

Because this initiative is targeted at a second-year Bachelor of Pharmacy cohort, it can take a while for learners to develop the critical thinking they need to have an enquiry-based approach to their work.

The challenge is getting them to understand the need to evidence their practice in research, by referring to quality literature – but also to get them to understand that it's fundamental to their lifelong learning and application in the clinical setting.

Being in second year means these students haven't quite had exposure to the workplace yet, so the unit is trying to encourage them to embrace a very critical, and lifelong enquiry-driven approach to learning.

Another challenge is posed by a fairly traditional curriculum, with traditional lectures and exams. The ability to create an approach to information that's critical and which triggers curiosity among students is always tricky.

Using learning analytics to understand student behaviour

It's been an interesting journey so far, and recently there has been some evidence to suggest that students are coming back to our online resources when they're in their internship year; or are about to undertake their internship year.

Students are enrolled in a Diploma of Practice in their final year, and from our analytics we see that they're returning to the online module just as they're about to enter that internship year. The module has a few guidelines that show them how to break down a clinical question and then go into the relevant databases to try and find quality resources.

This is the kind of skill not all students necessarily retain unless they need it. At the moment, they have an EBP assignment to do in their second-year unit, and that's where we come in. It's important to see how we've made an impact on student learning. Analytics suggest that students are returning to the module in their own time, at their own need, which means that we've produced something that's fit for purpose.

We use the MOODLE platform to capture this data and other related information. The university is exploring different ways of being able to capture information, because MOODLE hasn't necessarily been set up to do that in the best way possible. By using Google Forms to capture student feed back, we're able to collect qualitative and quantitative information at the same time.

The Library is still experimenting with its analytics and the story it wants to tell using this information. As we have more than three years of activity behind this initiative, we are in a unique position to examine longitudinal trends and patterns.

For example, some interesting information could be how many students are using specific resources, and when they seem to revisit those resources. This could be at the beginning of a semester or when an assignment is due. This type of information tells us a lot about student behaviours.

In terms of measuring learning outcomes, we try to compare overall scores and identify 'bell curves' for the semesters. But we're realising that it's quite difficult at the moment to quantify score increases or levels of engagement. Having said that, the students are already a very high performing cohort, so it could be that that bell curve is a fairly stable one.

This particular unit has always had a very strong collaboration and partnership with the Library, but it's also become somewhat of a driver for more collaboration at our Faculty. To enable enquiry-driven learning for students through a curriculum, creating curiosity is key. Trying to find a way to genuinely make students curious about their discipline and involving them in moving the discipline forward is our long-term aim.

INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

Be sure to join us at the 6th Annual Blended Learning Summit taking place on the 17 – 18 October in Sydney.

For more information visit <https://blended-learning.iqpc.com.au> or call +61 2 9229 1000 or email enquire@iqpc.com.au

