

Experiences of applying a 'blended' learning approach to a client-based student project

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Abstract. This paper discusses an experientially-based course in Human Resource Management (HRM) which provide students with an opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge acquired during their degree in an organization setting. The course takes a client-based project (CBP) approach that incorporates 'blended learning.' It begins with classroom-based sessions that provide the students with basic 'tools' such as the use of project management software before moving off-campus to the client organisation. As the projects progress, students find themselves increasingly engaged in the dynamics of managing team performance and maintaining communication with the client, the team and the teacher making extensive use of an e-communication platform. While primarily 'content-focused' the quintessential learning comes from the processes the student teams are engaged in. This includes the management of their team, directing the project and maintaining effective communication and co-ordination within and between teams. Qualitative assessment of the students' learning was gathered through a formal assessment at the conclusion of the project, electronic peer evaluations within each team and an on-going individual e-journal. The project and 'blended learning' approach provided a powerful learning experience for the students as they attempt to manage the processes required to achieve the project objectives. The client obtained useful information while also developing a relationship with the University. For the teacher, the 'blended approach' provided valuable insights into the use of client-based projects, self-managing teams and the scope and limitations of e-communication technologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

*Come writers and critics
Who prophesize with your pen
And keep your eyes wide
The chance won't come again
And don't speak too soon
For the wheel's still in spin
And there's no tellin' who
That it's namin'.
For the loser now
Will be later to win
For the times they are a-changin'.*

Bob Dylan 1964

As educators, how can we design learning situations that meet the needs of our students, using next generation's technology rather than the last? Kirkley and Kirkley (2005) articulate the challenge; 'With advances in computer technology and networked learning, we have exciting opportunities to design learning environments that are realistic, authentic, engaging and extremely fun.'(p.42) But are we as educators seizing these opportunities? Or are we content to rely on yesterday's technologies and traditional methods of teaching despite the fact that our students are daily, fully engaged with 21st century technologies?

This paper discusses the application of 'blended learning' in an Human Resource Management course. It describes a somewhat stumbling 'Road to Damascus' experience and in this sense, is itself a reflective work providing an opportunity for locating these insights into a pedagogical context. It also highlights the importance of the learning environment, where "we cannot separate what is learned from how it is learned." (Savery & Duffy 1995, p1).

1.1 Blended Learning

The rapid growth in the application of computer technology in education has expanded the possibilities for experimentation in the design of learning situations. It has for example made it possible to involve students in external learning situations while still enabling teachers to remain engaged with their students outside the traditional boundary of the university.

Traditional approaches to learning often rely on face-to-face interactions, for example lectures where, in theory 'live' interaction with the learner is possible. In practice, as many teachers know, particularly in situations where large classes are the norm, it is arguable whether this takes place. Frequently technology is used as a substitute for face-to-face contact through simulcast broadcasts or for the transmission of online material. Sadly the rationale often appears to be more economic driven rather than a desire to apply innovative 21st century technology.

Both traditional and computer-based approaches however have their place. Computer-driven technology in education to this point often lacks the human element that comes from face-to-face interactions. On the other-hand traditional approaches are often inflexible and restrictive in terms of timing and location. (Osugothorpe & Graham 2003)

In an attempt to maximize the strengths of both approaches, Osugothorpe and Graham (2003) proposed a 'blended learning' approach which contends that there are 'inherent benefits in face-to-face interactions (both among learners and between learners and instructors) as well as the understanding that there are some inherent advantages to using online methods in their teaching' (p.227) They go on to argue that the aim is to find 'a harmonious balance between online

access to knowledge and face-to-face human interactions.’(p. 228) By its very nature ‘blended learning’ incorporates key principles of experiential learning, notably using direct experience as the resource of learning, explicit reflection, and an active (doing, and experimentation) phase of learning and formalised feedback (Moon 2004).

1.2 Designing effective learning situations

What principles can we draw on when designing experiential learning situations? How did these influence the design of this particular learning situation?

Savery and Duffy’s (1995) assertion that ‘we cannot separate what is learned from how it is learned.’ (p.1) resonates in this project and includes:

- Anchoring learning activities in a larger task or problem maintaining that; “Learning must have a purpose beyond than ‘It has been assigned.’ We learn in order to be able to function more effectively in our world.” (p.3)
- Supporting the learner in the ownership of the overall problem or task.
- Designing an authentic task where “the cognitive demands i.e. the thinking required are consistent with the cognitive demands in the environment for which they are being prepared.” (p.4)
- Designing the task to reflect the complexity of the environment the students should be able to function in at the end of the learning.
- Emphasising ownership of the process used to develop the solution; learners need to own the problem solving process as well as owning the problem itself.
- Most importantly, designing learning situations that support and challenge the learner’s thinking. The authors assert; “The critical goal is to support the learner in becoming an effective worker/thinker in the particular domain. The teacher must assume the roles of consultant and coach.”(p. 5)
- Encouraging the testing of ideas against alternative views and alternative contexts.
- Providing opportunity for reflection on both the content and the process; “Teachers should model reflective thinking throughout the learning process and support the learners in reflecting on the strategies for learning as well as what was learned.” (p.6)

2. CLIENT-BASED PROJECTS

A great deal has been written about the need for business graduates to develop practical skills and gain relevant experience before entering the world of work. In 1998 the Conference Board stated; “Partnerships between education and industry are viewed as vital investments in America’s future that can energise and profit all partners.” (The Conference Board, 1998). Often however a ‘gap’ appears to exist between the skills sought by business and those possessed by graduates (Oblinger & Verville, 1998). Attempts to bridge this ‘gap’ have often taken the form of short term

work placements, which are invariably located at the lower levels of organisation. While useful, this type of experience lacks the vital element of problem-solving and ownership of the ‘solution generation’ process as articulated by Savery and Duffy.

This project adopts a client-based approach (CBP) which Bunthorne & Gravois Lee (2005) maintain is a “powerful pedagogical tool enabling student to apply... their knowledge to the needs of an actual client.”(p.172). The authors argue the benefits include:

- Facilitating active, experiential learning
- Fostering problem solving skills, critical thinking, communication and teamwork
- Adding realism to classroom based learning
- Heightening students’ motivation in the knowledge that their recommendations may be actually used.

The paper reflects Bunthorne and Garvois Lee approach with students working with clients who have authentic, ‘real life’ projects as opposed to artificial, case-based exercises conducted in the safety of the campus. This is a critical difference. These ‘real life’ situations provide an opportunity for student to learn through experience which as Huxley aptly points out, “...is not what happens to you; it's what you do with what happens to you.” (Huxley, 1932)

2.1 The project

The project involved undergraduate students in the final year of a four year management degree. The stated aim of the paper is to provide students with the opportunity to apply theoretical knowledge acquired during their degree in a real-life setting.

Prior to the semester, the search began for a project in the local community resulting in an investigation into the skill shortage in local industries. The research design called for initial interviews in four industries as preparation for data collection. Access to organisations and managers was facilitated by the client. Deliverable outputs included a research report and an oral presentation.

The class was divided into four self-managing teams each responsible for collecting data from one industry. Team members were selected with the aim of creating balance in terms of age, gender, experience and ethnicity. Each team appointed its own leader. Through an initial session with the class, a research proposal was developed which was submitted to the client. After modifications, the proposal was accepted and the project got underway.

The project can be seen as operating at two different but related levels:

- Ostensibly ‘content-driven’ and focused on achieving the project objectives and the expected outputs for the client.
- ‘Process-focused’ with the learning coming from the interactions within and between the teams. These included the management of the teams, leadership, and

effective communication and co-ordination within and between the teams.

To achieve the 'content' objectives students were required to apply practical research skills such as research design, designing data collection instruments, interviewing, analyzing data, writing a report and making a presentation. The teams also had to grapple with the process dynamics to achieve the project objectives including interacting regularly with the client.

2.2 Assessment

Assessing team-based projects is a complex issue, attempting as it does to balance the contributions of individuals to the overall collective outcome. (Jones & McMaster 2003) The assessment methods used attempt to capture both the process and content learning and include:

- A client report. Each team was responsible for producing a report on its industry which had then to be incorporated into an overall report. This proved to be a major challenge for the teams.
- An individual paper which gave students the opportunity to examine selected aspects of the skill shortage in New Zealand.
- An electronic journal which formed the basis of a reflective paper. Using the e-communication platform, Moodle, students were required to write at least three journal entries each week which only the teacher and student could view and discuss. Over the semester the entries built up and formed the basis for a final individual process paper where students reflected on their learning during the life of the project.
- A peer assessment where each member rated, on an electronic assessment sheet, the contribution of members of the team to achieving the team's objectives.
- Individual feedback on a range of criteria at the completion of the project.

2.3 Into action

The class began much like any other. The teacher introduced the approach to be taken supported by ex-students from the previous year recounting their experiences. It was explained that the class would undertake a research project for a client which would involve a 'blend' of a traditional lecture-driven classes with external research undertaken in teams (groans!). It was explained that the majority of interactions would not take place in the classroom but outside, hence the reliance on the electronic platform for communication. If the class understood the importance of all of this, it was not obvious at this point.

In the early stages of the course, class sessions were devoted to the use of the e-communication platform, in this case using both synchronous and asynchronous discussions. Other sessions were devoted to the use of project management software, mind-mapping software, research design, data collection, analysis, report writing and effective presentation.

At a subsequent session the teams developed a project proposal which was presented to the client. After modification this was accepted and the project got underway.

As the semester progressed, class meetings became less frequent and arranged on a 'need to know basis.' From the outset it was made clear that classes would take a 'from me to you' approach, that is, the teacher would make the initial running but increasingly the teams would be expected to assume ownership of the process. Again, it is debatable whether at the initial phase this actually registered with the class. Only later did the significance of this become obvious.

Each team was allocated an industry to research while one team was also given the task of conducting secondary research on the skill crisis in New Zealand. The teams then worked on constructing a sample and developing an interview schedule for data collection. This was tested with a small number of managers and the interviews conducted. Twenty-nine (29) managers were interviewed in four industries including government agencies involved in industry training.

The teams then set out to analyze the data which they found difficult to do. Combining the four parts into one integrated report proved to be an even greater challenge. Finally, the teams delivered a one hour presentation to the client and an invited audience of faculty members.

3. WHAT LEARNING TOOK PLACE?

Assessing what students learned from the experience came mainly from their learning journals where they chronicled their journey which was often challenging and uncomfortable for many of them.

3.1 The difficulties of managing the teams

For the students managing the processes was often a difficult and frustrating experience. Team leadership, communicating within and between teams and co-ordination proved to be a continual challenge. Although each team selected a 'leader', in reality this meant that the person who put himself or herself forward was not necessarily the best equipped to provide the direction needed. One team was 'led' by a student who appeared more interested in impressing future employers than in managing the team. Deadlines were missed and internal wrangles became the norm. This led to the emergence of 'informal leaders' which led to greater confusion. Satisfaction levels dropped as the team leaders wearied of managing the people aspects of the project. Some of the groups broke down and the 'emergent leaders' had to take over simply to complete the project.

Managing the team dynamics became increasingly difficult as the teams scrambled to produce the final report which eventually led to the 'crisis meeting' described below.

3.2 Communication

Effective communication was critical for completion of the project. At the start of the semester a session was

devoted to use of the e-platform with three channels being set up.

- Group level discussions. This enabled group members to 'talk' with other members of their group with the discussion being 'posted' on the group channel. This also allowed team members and the teacher to communicate with each other. Member of other teams were not able to look into each other's discussions.
- Leader discussions. This allowed team leaders to talk to each other and the teacher.
- A general class forum for open discussion where progress on the project could be discussed. It also allowed for sharing information and posting content material such as readings.

Some students made heavy use of the e-communication platform while others did not which was evidenced in both the quantity and quality of the postings. Some students made only perfunctory, all too obvious comments along the lines of 'Hey everyone. . . Cool idea...' while others used it to discuss their ideas and share information. A pattern emerged where the latter made substantial contributions while a minority simply went through the motions. The e-channel was particularly appreciated by older, mature students enabling them to balance their home and study commitments.

Communication between the leaders and the teacher was not always smooth. For a time at the beginning of the semester, the team leaders appeared reluctant to assume their role looking instead for confirmation that what they were doing was 'right.' While they were encouraged to 'make decisions' this tended to either not to be believed or was viewed as a form of abdication of the teacher's traditional role. Some students were uneasy about making independent decisions after years of a traditional 'teacher-centred' approach. This resulted in confusion and lack of clarity as the teams struggled with the independent learning situation they were immersed in. A critical point arrived when it became clear that the teacher would have to intervene as the project was in danger of being compromised. A 'crisis meeting' was called which was a critical point in the project.

3.3 The crisis meeting

Well into the life of the project, a critical event took place which had a profound impact on the class, the project and the learning outcomes. Teams were asked to attend a 'review' session to present their findings in preparation for incorporating them into the final report. Prior e-discussion had taken place with each group. All appeared well with the teams apparently clear about what was expected at the meeting.

At the review however the team leaders appeared reticent about presenting their findings. With over two-thirds of the project time elapsed and the understanding that the 'mini-reports' were making progress, this was disturbing as it became evident that the teams were not well prepared to present their findings. Some asked, 'What is the point? We know what to do.'

Eventually one of the team leaders took the floor and began to present the findings. Serious flaws soon became apparent and that the teams had experienced considerable difficulty in combining their findings into one coherent report. Instead they had opted for a 'one-size fits all' format, generalising the findings to a point that the report lacked the specificity expected by the client. The result was a confusing report which did not do justice the teams' efforts. The report contained valuable information but it was poorly presented and it was obviously 'back to the drawing board' time.

Further questioning by the teacher was interpreted as an 'attack' on the teams' work which in reality was an attempt to provide direction in an effort to salvage the project. The atmosphere in the class cooled and attempts to clarify the situation were unsuccessful and even resented. The class broke up in bad humour with the students unhappy and disappointed with the response to their presentation.

3.4 What happened next?

The student journals revealed the following about the "crisis meeting":

- The teams resented what they saw as 'criticism' of 'their' findings and felt that their efforts were undermined at the 'crisis' meeting.
- The presentation revealed the teams' inexperience in managing the complexities involved in the project, particularly analysing and interpreting the data to produce an integrated report. Their lack of experience in acting independently led them to become defensive when their performance came into question. There was also misunderstanding about the teacher's role as sponsor for the project. In practice this was the moment when 'ownership' of the project became real. The students' inexperience led them to view critical feedback on their work in a defensive way for in their previous traditional learning settings, this sort of 'show and tell' sessions had not taken place.
- Communications that appeared clear on the electronic forum took on a far more 'personal' tone in the face-to-face encounter where the dynamics became emotional and real.
- In their reflective papers, many of the students referred to this seminal event, identifying their own lack of experience in dealing with 'critical' feedback. Nowhere in previous papers had they been called upon to defend the validity of their findings and recommendations or been called upon to assess them in terms of meeting an external client's expectations. To this point they had operated in a safe classroom environment.

3.5 What was learned?

- A great deal! Managing the delicate balance between the goals of developing students to 'self-manage' the project while also meeting the expectations of delivering a quality output for a client was difficult to achieve. From the outset 'process learning' was seen as of paramount importance, that is, not just *what* was

learned but also *how* it was learned, Nevertheless, the client expected 'answers' in the form of a quality report. As the semester progressed, the deliverable outcomes grew in importance to students and teacher which resulted in tensions.

- Although the electronic medium was an efficient tool for communicating between the teacher, teams and team leaders, making the most of these interactions posed a challenge. At any one time, four or five students might be posting information. To do justice to their questions, queries and ideas required a great deal of time and all four teams expected the same level of attention. The result was that it became increasingly difficult to analyze the quality of the communication taking place within and between the teams or to do justice to the student's requests. Managing a 'blended' project involving 29 students proved to be extremely demanding, especially since this was only one of three papers being taught in the semester. Such an approach is very time-consuming.
- Providing the 'right' balance of direction and autonomy for the teams required moving away from the traditional role of teacher to becoming a 'facilitator.' In practice this was demanding not the least being overcoming the students' preconceived notions of the role of the teacher.
- Students found the responsibility of 'ownership' of the project challenging. This was an unfamiliar role for them, especially the team leaders with the added pressure that they had deadlines to meet and a real client waiting for the findings. The challenge was how to give 'the learners' genuine ownership of the process but also to ensure that the project outcomes met the client's expectations. This was a difficult balancing act for the *teacher as 'learner'* as well as for *students as 'learners.'* The students expected their teachers to be the all-knowing experts rather than as also a learner in this situation. When the 'crisis' occurred they became defensive and looked to escape when the reality became too uncomfortable.

4. REFLECTIONS

This paper is itself a 'reflective' exercise for the teacher. What insights emerged?

- After four years in a highly structured programme, the students found themselves plunged into a very different learning situation which produced a range of responses. Some found it frustrating and ambiguous, while others found it challenging, real and stimulating.
- Most found the e-communication platform 'liberating' while some found it impersonal and tedious.
- Approximately 70% of the class indicated that they found the client-based project and 'blend' of classes with online learning stimulating and challenging. Without the structure of attending lectures and tutorials a small number were able to coast without putting in much effort, relying instead on the team leaders and other team members. They in effect became 'social loafers.' (Duncan 1994 p.79)

- Some students produced insightful and often moving reflective papers where they considered their learning journey. A minority developed 'grocery lists' which showed little evidence of reflection. Indeed some struggled throughout with the concept of 'reflection' despite being provided with relevant readings at the outset of the class.

- There was an important 'cultural dimension' in that for the small number of international students in the class, the challenges associated with the approach were even greater. For students from a Confucian based educational background, the 'blended' approach was particularly challenging. Opening themselves up through their reflective journal was a challenging experience for them.

- The teacher became increasingly aware of the potential of the approach but also of the fragilities of the processes. The 'crisis meeting' was a good example of this.

- When engaging in client-based projects a formal contract between all parties is critical, as the responsibilities to the client and other stakeholders cannot be abdicated.

- Development of genuine 'ownership' of the problem is crucial and difficult to realise in the short semester time-frame.

- The importance of role clarity between the teacher and students cannot be over-estimated. From the outset, the 'facilitator' role needs to be continually demonstrated as the students look for guidance while also being encouraged to act independently.

5. CONCLUSION

As Dylan whined on more than 40 years ago, *'The times they are a-changin.'* Many of our students have discovered Dylan's music retrospectively courtesy of their 21st century technology, MP3/4 and iPods. Yet in their studies they are just as likely to experience learning environments that are still firmly located in the 20th century, for example, sitting in serried ranks in lecture theatres being talked at.

The reflections presented in this paper attempt to capture the challenges, opportunities and limitations of adopting a 'blended' approach to learning. For both students and teacher the journey had its highs and lows but for the majority of students it became the high point of the semester, 'their' project. This was demonstrated at the mid-semester break when the majority of the class worked through the break to meet the projects goals and tameable they set themselves at the outset. The project provided a real learning experience which the students had not encounter in previous courses. Using a 'blend' of e-communication with face-to-face interactions gave them a degree of flexibility that allowed them to learn outside of the traditional classroom setting. The boundaries for this approach include the issue of student numbers and time but far more importantly, the teacher's predisposition to creativity and risk. The author takes the view however that is better to set out on the Road to Damascus than to sit around waiting for the call!

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