

Blended Learning and Teaching: Synergy in Action

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on the results of research undertaken during the implementation of a blended delivery approach to the Bachelor of Applied Social Sciences (Social Work) degree at Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) in New Zealand. The research focusses on the early stages of programme development and delivery and takes a qualitative approach to understanding the impact the changed approach to teaching and learning had on both staff and students. Thematic analysis was applied to the responses from focus group discussions and open-ended survey questions which revealed the challenges and advantages of delivering the programme. Consistent within this research were themes related to pedagogical approaches, the time and space to construct a blended programme, students' engagement in the learning, technological practicalities, student orientation to blended learning, and the development of relationships in a blended environment. While these themes were largely congruent with those reported in existing literature, they do provide contextual

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BACKGROUND

This article reports the results of research focussing on the blended delivery of the Bachelor of Applied Social Sciences (Social Work) (BASS (SW)) degree at the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) in New Zealand. At the beginning of 2011 two New Zealand provincial tertiary institutions, located 215 kilometres apart, merged into a single institute. As a consequence, the BASS (SW) degree required delivery over two campuses. To enable the degree to be delivered in an equitable manner to the two student cohorts, it was decided to deliver it using a blended learning approach. This meant lecturers had to redesign their degree courses for integrated online and face-to-face learning, develop skills in teaching technologies, and learn new systems and processes for cross-campus communication and teaching. It required lecturers to undertake significant professional development in the use of technologies for online learning and teaching, and each campus required upgraded technologies and supporting infrastructure to enable an equitable delivery of the newly harmonized academic degree offering.

Within EIT, blended learning meant different things to different people. At the beginning of the project, some lecturers thought 'going blended' meant delivering lectures using video and web-conferencing technologies. Others acknowledged it meant a complete redesign of courses where online and face-to-face are integrated seamlessly over the student journey. Regardless of personal perceptions and expectations, the institution defined blended learning as facilitating a course with both face-to-face and online components to a student cohort located across two campuses. This meant that the BASS (SW) programme required simultaneous online and face-to-face delivery. The social work lecturers worked face-to-face with their local cohort and simultaneously taught both cohorts when online.

To ensure students across both campuses had equitable learning experiences, theoretical components of most courses were delivered online and face-to-face time was used to deliver the practical components of the programme. Generally courses were allocated two teaching hours face to face and two teaching hours online. Students were expected to study independently and four courses of 15 credits each make up fulltime study of approximately 37 hours per week. The face-to-face classes which were theory based had approximately 15-20 students in attendance and the skills-based classes averaged around 12 students. This enabled students to receive ongoing feedback and interaction in a face-to-face environment. The face-to-face classes supported ongoing skills development, working collaboratively and undertaking experiential activities. Generally the online work tended to be knowledge based, although learning opportunities for reflective comment, as well as analysis and critique, were built into the activities. Five courses, including practicums, were delivered wholly face-to-face because of the nature of the content.

Several technologies were integral to making the shift to blended learning. The institute's Moodle-based learning management system formed the backbone of the courses. Moodle is designed to support learners with a set of tools guided by the principles of social constructionist pedagogy where students have the opportunity to communicate, share knowledge and work collaboratively over the course of their learning. As Moodle is web-based, students at both campuses had access to the same learning materials, were able to participate in individual and collaborative learning activities and had ubiquitous access to course comm-

unication and information. Each existing BASS (SW) course was redeveloped to ensure the best mix of online and face-to-face activities and learning opportunities, taking advantage of the strengths of each delivery mode. The BASS (SW) lecturers had the support of an education advisor in learning technologies whose role was to assist lecturers with course design and development, technology training, and in making the paradigm shift from being solely classroom lecturers to blended learning facilitators.

Many online activities, including case studies, critiques and reflective comment, were facilitated in the Moodle discussion forums. Quizzes offered opportunities for students to self-test knowledge of concepts, terminology and understanding of theory. Collaborative group activities enabled students to utilize individual learning and build on each other's knowledge to create documents, presentations or other group-based tasks. This collaborative learning took place across both cohorts. Students also created their own resources, including a social work toolkit, which they shared with their peers, seeking reflective comment and feedback. Web-based presentation tools, collaborative authoring tools, and content-creation tools were adopted when the use of these tools aligned with the course learning outcomes. Some lecturers created topical 8- to 15-minute videos that included a mini-lecture and embedded learning activities. These videos provided contextual background information and necessary pre-learning in readiness for the next learning topic. These were uploaded to Moodle for students to watch and interact with. In addition to the mini-lectures and activities, the Moodle courses also provided students with relevant readings and links to articles and websites. In order to integrate the online and face-to-face learning, timeframes and requirements were provided to sequence the online activities and direct the students. In some circumstances, video and web-conferencing tools were used to facilitate engagement between the two regional cohorts.

The face-to-face sessions included skills practice and classroom-based interactive learning sessions including group work, discussions, role-plays and practicums. The BASS (SW) is delivered within bicultural and multicultural communities and taking account of this was pivotal to ensuring the learning opportunities were authentic and relevant. Some teaching and learning took place on Te Ara o Tāwhaki Marae (Māori meeting place) providing an authentic bicultural context and experience.

Most of the students entering the BASS (SW) programme bring with them the contextual knowledge and lived experiences of growing up in the region, (EIT, 2015). In developing a blended programme for this student cohort, regional demographics were considered, along with the nature of social work and pedagogical principles.

The authors of this article were directly involved in the process of blending the BASS (SW) degree. The first is a senior social work lecturer with 10 years' social work teaching experience. The second is the education advisor in learning technologies who worked with the BASS (SW) team over the three years it took to develop and enable blended learning and teaching. Both authors currently work with the BASS (SW) team and continually seek ways to refine and improve the blended learning programme.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Blended learning integrates traditional classroom based learning and teaching with online or e-learning activities (Ward & LaBranche, 2003). Bonk and Graham (2006) describe it similarly, “Blended learning systems combine face to face instruction with computer mediated instruction” (p. 5). Blended learning allows greater use of computer-based and web-based technologies to further engage student learning (Vaughan, 2007) and the strategic use of classroom time for learning activities effectively supported by being in a face-to-face environment, such as for skills practice. Garrison and Vaughan (2008) emphasised the “unique learning experience” (p. 5) when two different platforms are integrated and used as the vehicle for teaching “such that the strengths of each are blended into a unique learning experience congruent with the context and intended educational purpose” (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 5). The blending of face-to-face and online learning creates an environment where learning activities can be enhanced, class contact hours are restructured and student engagement optimized (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

In developing the blended social work programme pedagogical principles relevant to social work practice were considered. Larrison and Korr (2013, p. 200) suggested that, “Competent practice necessitates that emerging practitioners recognize – through self-awareness, critical reflectivity, and analytical thinking – that how they make use of who they are is an integral component of one’s practical and purposeful action.” Bellefeuille (2006, pp. 86-87) outlined the key components of a constructivist approach to social work education suggesting that students learning from a curriculum informed by a constructivist pedagogy would develop self-awareness and analytical and critical thinking. They suggested such learning included, “the multifaceted interplay among learners’ existing knowledge, the learning context, and the area of study”. Social work educators are tasked with the role of providing learning opportunities that ensure the curriculum is informed by learning experiences that “[legitimise] the person of the practitioner as an interconnective and central feature of social work education [and] may best help facilitate the integration of science and art, cognition and emotion, and class work and fieldwork, necessary for social work practice competency” (Larrison & Korr, 2013, p. 205).

The Institution’s BASS (SW) philosophy emphasised “the use of critical thinking skills to analyse and evaluate information and solve problems” (EIT, 2011, p. 4). In tandem with the development of these skills is the development of self-awareness as well as the knowledge base that informs practice. To develop these skills, knowledge and attributes, Thomas and Quinney (2011) suggest that the criteria for learning activities, both in face-to-face and online settings, should include relevance and authenticity. Realistic case scenarios need to be designed to increase in complexity as students’ progress through their course of study. This provides opportunities for students to grapple with differing perspectives and multiple agendas (Herrington et al., 2004, pp. 11-13, cited in Thomas & Quinney, 2011, p. 70). Opportunities for students to engage with a range of perspectives, and the possibility of multiple outcomes, contribute to a transformative social work education programme. Bellefeuille (2006) suggests that “online learning supports the shift to constructivist approaches, encourages students to take responsibility for their learning and provides the opportunity for students to engage with ... human and

technology-based interactions” (p. 97). Learning and teaching that is predicated on a constructivist approach contributes to a programme that encourages analytical thinking and critical reflection, skills development, and self-development (Bellefeuille, 2006).

Developing a blended programme involves reconceptualization and redesign of the traditional face-to-face programme as well as “the purposeful selection, combination, and use of delivery platforms (i.e., face to face and online learning) and technologies in the design and implementation of blended learning” (Ayla, 2009, p. 284). Reconceptualising and redesigning requires time and space and the skill to put creative teaching and learning ideas into practice in a blended context and the expertise to write appropriately for online delivery. It also requires flexibility to make a shift from the spoken to the written word and to develop relationships in a virtual environment if learning experiences are going to result in a transformative education programme (Thomas & Quinney, 2011).

Pelech (2010) critically appraised blended delivery, making reference to feedback from students about what worked well and what did not. Essential components include: lecturer presence and availability online; timely feedback; clear online communication; ongoing clarification of expectations; guidance regarding the size of posts; academic and technological support; a well organised site; and insight into the pressures and cultural social contexts of the students. Pelech (2010) also noted the importance of ensuring students have access to technology that supports the requirements of the online learning component, such as adequate bandwidth and relevant software packages.

Scepticism about delivering effective online social work courses is challenged by Bellefeuille’s (2006) evaluation of a competency based e-learning child welfare practice course. The research appraised the activities and their effectiveness in, “meeting the needs of the learners” (Bellefeuille, 2006, p. 94). Bellefeuille’s (2006) research comprised a semi-structured survey and focus groups. In their responses, participating students noted frustration when there were technological glitches and too many activities. They also commented that the preparation for, and orientation to, learning online needed to be early (Bellefeuille, 2006, pp. 96-97). While these points highlight potential barriers to learning, overall the students’ responses were overwhelmingly positive. Students found the course to be a positive learning experience, broadening both their knowledge and skills.

Ayla (2009), in referring to blended social work programmes, suggested focussing research on the blended programme itself rather than making comparisons between face-to-face delivery and online programmes, as the research would potentially offer evaluative comment and guidance for programme development and improvement. It is important to gain both students’ and teachers’ perspectives, and also information about the role and impact of technology in the learning and teaching processes. Ayla (2009) suggested that research about “factors relating to the process of learning including teaching methods and approaches” (p. 284) would assist to provide robust information about what constitutes a quality learning experience.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

The purpose of this research was to capture staff and student experiences, perspectives and perceptions of the BASS (SW) blended programme in its early stages of blended delivery. Capturing the blended learning experiences of both staff and students, and responding to any lessons learned, would potentially benefit future blended learning development by informing both pedagogical approaches and professional development requirements and guiding future technology implementation.

METHODS

This research gathered qualitative data regarding staff and student experiences of blended teaching and learning and was captured over a two-year period via focus groups and online surveys. Staff and students involved in the blended delivery of BASS (SW) courses on two separate campuses were invited to participate in the research. All participation was voluntary. Seven focus group sessions were held for student participants, three on one campus and four on the other, involving a total of 30 students. Attendants at these sessions ranged from two to ten students and each involved students from within the same year group. All focus group recordings were transcribed by an independent transcription service. The key questions asked about their experiences of blended delivery were:

- What is the impact of blended delivery on your learning?
- What are the essential tools and skills that contribute to a positive learning experience in a blended environment?
- What shifts, if any, have you needed to make to embrace blended delivery?
- What/who has supported you to do this?
- What would you like to see more/less of?

These student participants were a reasonable representation of the BASS (SW) student body. This student body is typically female by majority and approximately half over are the age of 30 years. Approximately one third identify as Māori and a small number as Pasifica and ethnicities other than NZ European/Pākehā.

Four focus group discussions were facilitated for staff participants located across both campuses. Between two and four staff participated in each session from a total pool of seven teaching staff. Some staff attended more than one session. Staff participants included six female and one male with teaching experiences ranging from four to 20 years. The questions asked were essentially the same as those asked of the students except with a teaching focus.

Alongside the focus groups, data were collected from the same cohort of staff and students, during the same two-year time frame, via an online survey using the SurveyMonkey© tool. Four staff members and 42 students voluntarily completed the online survey. It was deployed to students several months after the focus group meetings, allowing additional

time for them to reflect on their experiences of the blended learning mode. The survey was open for the students for four months, at which point they would have been enrolled in the programme for six to 18 months. It was deployed for staff at the same time and remained open for four months.

The on-line survey mainly collected quantitative data pertaining to technology use and student levels of participation which are outside the scope of this paper. However, it also contained two open-ended questions which gathered qualitative data describing the participants' experiences of blended learning. These questions were:

- If you have any comments you would like to make about your experiences with discussion forum or wiki activities, please write them here.
- Which online activities do you appreciate most? Please explain.

Data gathered from these questions were subjected to the same thematic analysis as the focus group data and results are incorporated into the analysis reported below. Cross-checking of the data analysis was achieved within the research team.

ETHICS

This research was approved by the EIT Research Ethics and Approvals Committee in 2012. The focus groups were facilitated by an experienced research assistant who had no teaching or managerial role within the BASS (SW) programme. The online surveys were collated by a member of the institute's Educational Development Centre and the raw data, minus any identifying information, were provided to the researchers. All results are reported anonymously.

LIMITATIONS

The research sample was small. However, student attendance in the focus groups represented a cross-section of the cohort involved in the investigation and enrolled in the BASS (SW) programme.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis techniques were applied to the combined qualitative data derived from the surveys and the focus groups. It began with "the identification of topics" (Ezzy, 2002, p. 87) and, as Ezzy (2002) suggests, this stage "is exploratory, looking in the data for codes. As the coding scheme becomes more developed new forms of coding, referred to as axial and selective coding, are used that enable the development of an argument, or central story, around which the research report is organised" (p. 87). Emergent themes from the more complex coding are defined to capture the results from both data sources. The key themes are presented as the following sub-headings which integrate the research results with some discussion of the issues they raise. Some are common to both staff and students while others are relevant to only one participant group.

PEDAGOGICAL SHIFTS, CHANGES AND CHALLENGES

BASS (SW) lecturing staff commented on their heightened awareness of the role of critical thinking and the challenges when designing effective teaching and learning materials for cognitively complex concepts and ideas to be delivered online. In an online environment, interactive activities are needed to provide a platform for students to develop their reflective thinking skills. As one staff participant noted, “Students can’t learn just by listening to the tutor telling them what to do”; another made the comment that, with blended delivery, “you can’t just drill it into them”. One staff member commented in the online survey:

I have had to become more direct and succinct in my teaching style. I am one that traditionally has relied on story-telling or sharing experiences to demonstrate a point. I have not found the scope to do this online. I think I have usually relied on my natural good charm to engage with students, so going blended has meant that I have needed to think about my online presence and how to develop that so I can still engage with students, some who I may never see.

(Staff participant)

Integrating face-to-face and online approaches challenged staff to reflect on key components of the social work programme. Developing interactive learning opportunities in the face-to-face environment was familiar to them but a new set of tools and skills had to be developed for teaching online. Commenting on discussion forums, Tucker and Umphrey (2013) eloquently suggest that, “teachers design questions that pique interest, excite curiosity, inspire creativity, and drive higher order thinking. It is an art form to design questions that foster conversations that lead to a deeper understanding of a topic” (p. 4). The staff commented on how they needed to find ways to do this that did not rely so much on face-to-face interaction and spontaneity.

Redesigning courses for the blended programme involved reconceptualising the programme. What was familiar and known had to be reinterpreted and presented in a different way. It was more than simply repackaging the old material. Staff acknowledged this made them look critically at the resources and material they had previously used for their teaching and the ways in which these were being presented. One commented, “I have had to think and plan much more carefully and collect resources carefully because they become a much more important component of my course. I am also more aware of animating my presentation style in online lectures”. Staff also found this work to be time consuming and stressful: “It felt like a tidal wave” (staff participant). While a sense of being overwhelmed was a strongly reported theme, staff also commented on the satisfaction they felt from designing and delivering reconstructed courses.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TIME AND SPACE

Thomas and Quinney (2011) asserted that it is imperative to have ‘brain space’ to do the work required to redesign courses. The surveyed staff identified how their familiar teaching approaches were challenged. This was captured by one of the participants:

I started with the idea that I was a performance teacher, and going blended meant that I had to actually unpack that whole sense of identity and re-build it, which is a very difficult

and exhausting process. . . . the job of teaching becomes a different job entirely, that you are now facilitating them to take responsibility and I think in the long run that creates a lot of advantages. They can't rely on you to answer the question to fill the gap, they have to go back into what they've read, what's been discussed in forums, what's been part of the assessment tasks.
(Staff participant)

Redesigning courses was a complex task requiring access to resources and professional development to develop new and effective ways of working. Lecturers were provided with ongoing professional development in blended learning, course development, online facilitation and technical skills. This professional development ensured staff became familiar and competent with the pedagogies of blended learning, teaching in the online environment as well as skilled in using the variety of online tools that supported their teaching. A team of blended learning and technology experts facilitated the professional development. Ongoing help and support was provided on a one-to-one basis over the lifecycle of the programme development. Students also received a comprehensive introduction to the blended learning environment, how to navigate and participate in their online courses, and received ongoing technical support as new tools were introduced into their learning. A team of dedicated technology experts helped students make the transition into blended learning and provided ongoing support. This support continues as an institutional commitment to blended learning.

Aligning each aspect of a course, such as learning outcomes, course content and assessments, was familiar work for the staff but it required a significant shift in thinking to manage the complexities of these alignments when facilitating online and face-to-face learning, treating the two separate teaching spaces as a whole. Ellis, Goodyear, O'Hara, and Prosser (2007, p. 94) contend that learning becomes fragmented when students do not grasp the connections between "learning outcomes and the course purpose of the learning task". Staff had to consider student learning in both online and face-to-face environments, taking into account the alignment of learning outcomes, course content, activities and assessment, with applicable teaching approaches over both. The task is multilayered and requires time and space to reflect on how a particular pedagogical approach, such as an inquiry-based one, might inform teaching and learning in the different contexts. It was evident that, "It is not enough to 'layer' one on top of the other" (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, cited in Glogowska, Young, Lockyer, & Moule, 2011, p. 890). Successful integration, where the learning in the face-to-face environment supports and contributes to the learning in the online environment and vice versa, functions in such a way that the whole becomes greater than the sum of its parts (Glogowska et al., 2011). Achieving this demanded dedicated time and energy, as simply adjusting the current curriculum for use in a new delivery platform would have stymied the institution's commitment to delivering an equitable programme over the two geographically distanced campuses.

ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING

The surveyed staff noted that students who were doing well in the traditional face-to-face classroom continued to do well in the blended programme. These students were described as being able to research and learn independently. Equally, those who struggled in face-to-face delivery continued to struggle in the blended programme. From the students'

perspective, those who responded to the online survey commented on the importance of self-motivation, self-reliance and becoming independent in their study. For example, one student said they were “in control of their own learning, becoming self-reliant and independent as a student”. In reflecting on the learning programme in which they were involved, one staff member asked the question, “Did we inadvertently create some students who may have been more dependent on us as tutors than they needed to be?”

Students appreciated that, when working online, they could return to the material and take time to reflect on it. They commented positively about having the time to think and then respond online. As one student commented, “With social work and all the questions and activities, there is no specific right answer or specific wrong answer, it is the answer that involves a lot of thought.”

TECHNOLOGICAL PRACTICALITIES

Both staff and students expressed concern about technology break-downs. For example, it was assumed that a regular feature of blended delivery would be video-conferencing to facilitate cross-campus communication and collaboration. However, overall feedback led to video-conferencing being used sparingly because of “off-putting technology glitches” (staff participant). Staff and students found engaging with this technology difficult. Referring to video-conferencing, one staff participant commented, “I was privy to lots of technological issues with the course... and it almost became the expected norm and, I think, that really lowered the students’ enthusiasm and motivations and expectations in a way that I just sort of sat there and cringed.”

A related theme was the importance of students having a place to study and access to computers. It could not be assumed that all students had access to computers in their homes and the institute had to prepare for this by providing adequate computer access, study rooms on campus with computers for group work, technical training and service support.

Students noted that, from a practical perspective, online delivery allowed them flexibility in study time, particularly when they were on practicum placements. Students appreciated having this flexibility. There were fewer timetabled classes and, as one commented, “the number of early 8:00am starts had been reduced”.

STUDENT ORIENTATION TO BLENDED LEARNING

Students commented on the importance of allowing time for orientation to this way of learning. “It is new and different and it takes time to learn the skills” (student participant). They valued the support and commented on how the delivery worked when new skills and tools were modelled and practised face-to-face in the classroom. Pelech (2010) described how students undertaking a social work degree at the University of Calgary spend time becoming oriented to the technology they will use, noting how this orientation is very important if students are going to have the relevant technology skills to participate in the online activities. As students became familiar with the technology and made the shift to blended delivery, positive comments increased and their capacity to deal with malfunctions and stressful learning experiences grew (Pelech, 2010).

Clarity around student expectations was an issue the research highlighted. Students in the focus groups commented on receiving feedback and the ongoing interaction with lecturers. Pelech (2010) noted that, not only are timely responses and feedback important but also, “modelling effective communication is a key behaviour for instructors” (p. 293). Feedback from the student survey also clearly indicated the negative impact that slow or no response from lecturers had on their engagement in the learning process. One compellingly noted, “It would be appreciated if we could have some tutor feedback in our discussion forums. Have no idea if I am on the right track with it. Find students don’t comment on them either.” Another said, “I think if the tutors want us to take part in them, they themselves need to be prepared to reply to everyone and check them each day.” Reliable and ongoing online connections for building student/staff relationships was considered really important to the BASS (SW) students and was appreciated in the way lecturers took time to answer students’ questions, engage in discussions, and provide feedback.

DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS

Students and staff were consistently positive about the face-to-face learning and teaching experiences. Participants appreciated being able to connect both in the online and face-to-face environments as this enabled the development of “more intimate and deeper relationships” (student participant). The results of the student online survey supported this view, with 47.62% agreeing and 26.19% strongly agreeing that they had developed supportive relationships with their peers. In addition, 59.52% agreed and 11.90% strongly agreed with the statement that they considered themselves to be part of a community of learners. One staff participant described using humour to bring his/her “personality and heritage” into teaching, and commented how, “In the virtual class situation some of my personality has definitely come through.” The blended delivery across two campuses facilitated participants’ engagement with a wider range of lecturers and students which was perceived as being a positive feature, particularly in regard to class discussions and the different attributes, skills, and knowledge the lecturers brought to the courses. One student summed up the situation when s/he said, “It’s great as a student to be able to discuss and debate topics in an open forum where we can assess and evaluate not only how we view things but also learn from others in a constructive way that only adds to our learning experience.”

RESPONDING TO FEEDBACK

Both staff and students experienced what one staff participant observed as “a shift in the way communication happened”. While one staff member noted, of the face-to-face environment, “there is something to do with the richness of seeing people in action in a variety of ways”; a further comment stated, “in the online sessions they didn’t see the students’ body language, and didn’t see their personalities so much”. Similarly, a student described what s/he considered to be a “loss of relationship, not seeing the human attributes and no one to bounce ideas off”. These participants’ comments about the limitations of online relationships could be juxtaposed with another who said, “enjoying dialogue across campuses and with a wider range of staff than they had traditionally experienced” and the opportunity to develop trust and respect in a different way from what they were used to. Goldingay and Land (2014, p. 3) summarise this well: “The key to social presence in

education, therefore, is for students to feel connected to each other and to their lecturers as well as to the content being studied.”

The authors have continued to evaluate and develop the blended BASS (SW) programme being cognisant of feedback from the research as well as from ongoing evaluations. As a result, a cycle of ongoing continuous improvement has been implemented. For example, it was identified that students needed to be able to interact in an online environment in a multimodal manner. The online presentation tool, Voicethread, was introduced to provide both students and lecturers the opportunity to engage in written and oral online discussions. As one student explained:

I think that even though online learning has been tough to get used to, Voicethread makes it a lot better and more beneficial. For one, we are still able to interact through writing our own thoughts, and reading each others' comments, unlike an ordinary PowerPoint or online lecture.
(Student participant)

While the range of ‘user friendly’ technology tools has continued to grow, some of the technology used has become simplified and the activities themselves have become increasingly supportive of student learning.

Although changes have been made based on the research, at all times it was essential that the learners could readily navigate their way through the courses in an easy and consistent manner. To maintain familiarity, changes to course structure and tools were implemented slowly and with measured consideration. Students’ learning experiences were also optimised when lecturers paid attention to the practicalities of technology, student orientation, and to the influence of their roles, such as providing timely and meaningful feedback. Where the practicalities were attended to, barriers to satisfactory learning experiences were minimised.

CONCLUSION

This research explored the impact the implementation of a blended learning and teaching approach had on staff and students at EIT. The BASS (SW) degree underwent a significant change in order to facilitate delivery to a distant campus in a manner that provided an equitable learning opportunity to both student cohorts. This research revealed that, while such a re-development provided opportunities for social work teaching staff to reconceptualise their curriculum and its delivery, the move to blended learning was not without its challenges.

The process of moving to blended delivery challenged lecturers to develop a greater awareness of the role of critical thinking and reflection in social work education programmes. There was also a growing awareness of the different approaches to facilitating learning and teaching that supported the education and development of social work students. Students became more aware of the importance of self-motivation, self-reliance and independence in their study habits. The significance of adequate professional development for staff and technological support for students was also highlighted as each were challenged by the unfamiliar and in the beginning, frequent technological issues that impacted on their experience.

Developing relationships in the online environment was seen as challenging, however students appreciated the ability to make contact with their lecturer outside of class hours. In addition, the blended programme provided opportunities for connections with a more diverse range of students and lecturers, adding richness to the learning experience.

Although the issues raised by both the staff and students were largely congruent with the literature reviewed, the feedback gained has provided valuable insights to the BASS (SW) teaching and supporting technologies staff. This feedback has enabled a cycle of continuous improvement where incremental changes have been implemented to further benefit student experience and learning.

This research, in capturing the perceptions of those most closely involved and impacted by the BASS (SW) degree 'going blended', has demonstrated the considerations, issues, advantages and the progress made over the course of implementing an innovative blended learning and teaching approach to a social work programme's delivery. In doing so, this research provided a contextual basis for others considering a blended approach to social work education within Aotearoa New Zealand.

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