Self-directed student work groups using Blended Learning

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Abstract

This paper provides a description of an innovative teaching approach designed to facilitate student work groups using a blended learning approach that incorporates both traditional face-to-face teaching methods and an online student work group facility. The teaching approach is designed to accommodate a large introductory human resource management subject positioned within an undergraduate business degree.

Key words: Team work, blended learning, human resource management.

JEL Classification: I20; M12
Introduction

Contemporary organisations have adopted collaborative job designs and interdependent work practices cementing the importance of work groups as a device for enhancing business efficiency and effectiveness. Thus the structure of many corporations today reflects an increased reliance on group and team based operations (Davidson & Griffin, 2000). Understandably, given the continued growth and dependency on team based approaches to work, business and management schools have targeted group facilitation and teamwork skills as essential generic capabilities necessary for all graduates. Typically, the way in which business and management schools have responded to this developmental need has been to increase the use of team projects and group work as a core component of curriculum. Therefore, most business students routinely engage in collaborative group processes, regularly meeting in class as well as outside of class in order to complete a single interdependent team project or task (Druskat & Kayes, 2000). We acknowledge that in requiring such collaborative student activity this subject is not unique, however, the purpose of this paper is to introduce an innovative approach whereby the student work groups are facilitated using blended learning or more specifically a combination of face-to-face and virtual online approaches.

Computer mediated delivery of higher education is becoming increasingly common practice in universities today, partly in order to satisfy the diverse needs of the student population, and partly to maximise the use of scarce resources. While online learning is providing institutions with opportunities to advance distance education, academics are also increasingly embracing online and blended learning environments for on campus or face-to-face students. Business discipline scholars have accordingly contributed substantially to the development of research and practice into blended learning models (Arbaugh, Desai, Rau, & Sridhar, 2010). Although a great deal of such analysis and critique has focused on the quality of online delivery, the definition of blended learning is still actively debated. For the purposes of this paper blended learning is defined as “using the best delivery methodology(ies) available for a specific objective, including online, classroom-based instruction, electronic performance support, paper-based and formalised or informal on-the-job simulation” (Hoffman, 2011, p.12).

The principal learning vehicle in this unit is a semester long self-directed living case which students complete in small work groups of approximately four to five participants (Dickenson, Fisher, Shaw, & Southey, 1995). This is a powerful learning task that encourages students to learn and develop teamwork and facilitation skills, critical analytical skills, and an appreciation of the complexity of HRM decisions, as well as the interdependencies and implications of those decisions. In the past students have been supported through this process with traditional teaching and learning strategies (e.g., lectures, tutorials, staff consultation), and more recently with an online teaching site. However, we have become increasingly aware of the difficulty that our student work groups are having in finding mutually convenient days/times to participate in the group activity outside of their scheduled class. Therefore, we have re-designed our online teaching site to include private (password protected), individual student group working spaces. Within these working spaces each group has access to their own discussion forum, a chat room, and a drafting room that enables the members of the group to upload documents to share with one another. Essentially we have created an environment where our student work groups are able interact in a virtual team atmosphere to facilitate the completion of their group task.

Overview of Learning Objectives

This teaching approach has been employed in a large introductory human resource management (HRM) subject positioned within the HRM major of an undergraduate business degree. Each semester enrolments in the subject comprise of between 200 and 400 full and part-time domestic and international students who are undertaking HRM or
other business majors (e.g., management, accounting, economics, marketing), as well as students participating in programs from other academic disciplines such as education, engineering, health sciences and so on. To cater for the large number of participants the subject offers multiple classes during the day and evening on two campuses in the greater Brisbane area, with the classes facilitated by a team of permanent academic and part-time sessional staff (HR practitioners from both the public and private sectors).

The aim of the subject is to provide students with a foundation for the development of professional practice skills in human resource management. Students are required to demonstrate the knowledge and practical application of human resource and industrial relations theories and processes for managing the employment relationship. Generic analytical, research, interpersonal, and presentation skills are also developed. The subject architecture is essentially problem-based and designed to sustain the students’ progression through the self-directed living case, a semester long project completed by the students in small work groups of approximately four to five participants (Dickenson, et al., 1995). Students are supported through the learning process with a combination of 3 to 4 hours per week class contact, staff consultation, and a web-based online teaching site.

**Teaching and learning philosophy**

The learner-centred and problem-based design of this subject incorporates the fundamental assumptions and principles embedded in adult and action learning theories (Knowles, 1990; Kolb, 1984; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Therefore, it is important that an active and supportive learning environment is created to encourage and motivate the participants to confidently build upon the wealth of their own experiences, to take responsibility for their own learning, to think critically, and to solve problems experientially. Further, as mature learners prefer learning to occur in a social context, providing an interactive environment in which learners are able to discuss, share, and debate ideas and experiences is encouraged (Delahaye & Smith, 1998). Working collaboratively on the living case project is therefore an important learning vehicle to promote a deeper level of learning in terms of mastery and retention of material, knowledge transference, and the quality of critical thought and reasoning strategies (McFadzean & McKenzie, 2001).

In business, teams are suggested to be more successful than individuals acting alone by producing a greater number of quality informed decisions, demonstrating higher levels of motivation and performance, offsetting personal biases and blind spots, with teams also more likely than individuals to entertain innovative ideas or actions (Carlopio & Andrewartha, 2008). Group work is similarly viewed by many academics as a robust and methodologically sound technique for developing increased student learning outcomes (Gottschall & Garcia-Bayonas, 2008). However, some authors have challenged the success of student project teams, contending that they “often create more frustration and dislike of teamwork than appreciation for the diversity of perspectives and improved learning and performance that it makes possible” (Druskat & Kayes, 2000, p.329). Some of the problems that may arise in collaborative student project groups include poor communication and group decision making, unequal member participation, inappropriate dependence on authority, dysfunctional divisions of labour, destructive conflict and controversy, as well as other negative behaviours which can contribute to an unproductive group atmosphere and ineffectual group outcomes (Johnson & Johnson, 2009).
Implementation Guidelines

Facilitating student work groups

Taking into consideration the difficulties that can occur in student work groups, achieving productive and effective interdependent work teams does not occur magically from the moment that the students first form work groups in class, but rather building an effective team takes time and effort (Tyson, 1998). Therefore, an effective team is considered to be one that is characterised by a focus on accomplishing the group’s tasks and goals, a concern for the maintenance of appropriate working relationships (Nurick, 1993), and an ability to develop and adapt to changing external conditions (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). In this subject we have harnessed the benefits of the blended learning methodology to facilitate the development of our student work groups both on and off campus.

Face-to-face approaches

To foster the growth and progression of students through the acquisition and application of HRM theories and models to the living case project, and to promote the use of effective group process skills, the teaching faculty in this subject have adopted a mentoring approach to on campus tutorial facilitation. The mentoring approach is considered a superior instructional method because it permits the tutorial facilitator to embrace different strategies and roles for managing the learning experience at various junctures throughout the semester as necessary (Melander, 2001). For instance, as student project groups progress through the living case, tutorial facilitators are able to modify their mentoring of the groups from initially providing motivation and guidance, to support through coaching and feedback, and ultimately to an approach where students are engaged in discourse to debate and think critically about the material. In contrast, the more traditional approach of an instructor consistently presenting a predefined body of knowledge leaves little scope for the tutorial facilitators to meet the changing and maturing needs of the student groups. Therefore, the mentoring approach permits the teaching team to provide a supportive yet challenging environment that encourages the learner to engage with the subject content as well as with the process of participating effectively in a collaborative group project.

One example of the way in which a tutorial can be facilitated is provided in the following process description whereby facilitators guide and assist the students to establish a work group. During this process students are instructed to undertake a series of self-disclosure exercises that encourage them to seek out information from one another in order to form a work group of approximately four to five members. Once the groups have formed and initial introductions are completed, the facilitator moves the groups through a team building process with members of each work group discussing and negotiating the preferred way in which their group will proceed with the collaborative living case project. At the conclusion of this dialogue the group creates a collective learning contract that reflects their decisions - this contract will then be reviewed periodically throughout the semester.

While the example above demonstrates that time is scheduled during class for the work groups to meet with one another and to interact with their facilitator, it is critical for successful completion of the group project that the members of each project group work together on the living case outside of their regular class. However, the teaching team have become increasingly aware of the difficulty that our student work groups are having finding mutually convenient days and times to working co-operatively outside of their allocated class. Essentially, the diversity of our student cohort in terms of study majors, their geographic location, enrolment status (e.g. full or part-time), employment commitments, family responsibilities, and recreational pursuits and so on create substantial time and availability obstacles for the project groups to meet face-to-face.
Consequently, because of the difficulties that our students have encountered in arranging face-to-face meetings we realised that additional alternative approaches to facilitate their collaboration were necessary. To assist the project groups collaborative efforts, we embarked upon an innovative re-design of our existing online teaching web site to provide our student project groups with dedicated, private, and password protected virtual working spaces.

**Virtual approaches**

Substantial advances in computer and information technologies have opened the door for teaching staff to access a wider variety of teaching and learning strategies (McFadzean & McKenzie, 2001). The electronic delivery of education has enabled flexible learning environments that are less time and place dependent in comparison with traditional face-to-face modes, providing students with greater choice, convenience, and control over their learning environment (Johnstone, 1999). While the e-learning revolution has experienced its fair share of detractors and critics, some authors have suggested that the future for higher education will neither be solely online nor instructor-led classes, purporting instead that hybrid or blended models will emerge (Skill & Young, 2002). Further contending that these new integrated learning environments will embrace both virtual technology and face-to-face teaching approaches in a combination of in-class and electronically mediated experiences. Indeed, in our attempt to create greater opportunities for our students to work co-operatively as a group, we have embraced both face-to-face and virtual technologies. The following discussion now focuses on describing the group gallery addition to our existing online teaching web site.

**The group gallery**

The development of a virtual working space for our student groups emerged because of the challenges that they have been experiencing in finding suitable times and places to work together outside of scheduled classes. With the assistance on an instructional designer, individual working spaces or “group galleries” were created for each individual student project group using the existing technology available through our online teaching site. Within each group gallery there is a drafting room, and two virtual meeting rooms consisting of a discussion forum, and a chat room. To access their group’s gallery, project team members are provided with a team password at the beginning of the semester by their tutorial facilitator. The facilitator also provides them with initial general instructions for manoeuvring and navigating the web site as well as a number of suggestions for gaining the greatest benefit from the site.

The drafting room provides the members of the project group with a password secure virtual space that enables them to save and distribute copies of their individual contribution to the group’s living case project. Members may contribute to the drafting room in two ways, by either posting a file (e.g., MS Word, Excel, or PowerPoint) to the drafting room page, or by adding unformatted text straight into the drafting room page. Typically the way in which these features are commonly used is for the individual posting a file to the drafting room to also add a small amount of text to advise the other members of the content or the purpose of the file posting. Other members may access the files to collaboratively write and edit common documents, or to make comments or additions to the saved text. At this stage the students only have the capability of adding documents and text to the drafting room, and are not able to access the drafting room delete or archive functions. If students wish to have documents deleted from the group gallery’s drafting room they can do so with the assistance of the subject co-ordinator.

In addition to the drafting room, two virtual meeting rooms are located in the group gallery, a discussion forum, and a chat room. As with the drafting room the discussion forum is a password secure meeting room only accessible by the members of the
project group. The discussion forum is an asynchronous communication channel that permits the group members to contribute a topic or question for discussion, or to reply to another members question or topic post. The questions and topics posted to the discussion forum are saved in the forum to allow for other members to reply to questions in their own time. Likewise with the drafting room, all questions and responses appearing in the discussion forum remain posted for the duration of the semester as the delete and archive functions are not accessible by the students.

The second virtual meeting room available through the group gallery is the chat room. The chat room is synchronous communication operating in real time, allowing group members to interact with one another so that immediate responses can be sent and received. Unlike the drafting room and the discussion forum, the chat room communication is not permanently saved, and instead is automatically dissolved once the students leave the chat space.

Assessment Criteria Guide

A detailed description and analysis of the problem-based living case exercise that was the dominant learning vehicle in this subject is previously published (Dickenson et al., 1995). In contrast to more traditional forms of teaching HRM, the living case exercise enables the development of student teamwork. The project encourages student reflection on the implications of their decisions, as the case is a ‘living’ project where outcomes of earlier decisions may need to be revisited as later questions create additional complexity. The project also has an action-orientation as students are themselves making the decisions and realising the consequences of these actions instead of passively observing them in a case. Finally, the living-case integrates both strategic and functional activity providing students with an appreciation of the complexity of contemporary organisational policy and processes.

The marking criteria for the project is thus based upon the quality of the decisions made by the student groups, their ability to analyse and critique these decisions based upon conceptual and theoretical clarity and the applicability of such decisions to the case organisation’s strategy, desired culture and structure (Appendix A).

Student Feedback

Positive feedback is regularly received in this subject for both the content and the process of the subject, with overall student satisfaction ratings averaging 4.6 on a 5-point scale since the introduction of the blended learning initiative. Although detailed data is yet to become available, some of the early qualitative feedback provided by students included comments regarding the level of support provided by the design of the subject, such as “the combination of workbook instructions, class time for group work, and the online site is great”; the interactive nature of the tutorial classes, “my tutor was available during class to help our group with problem areas, especially the workbook”. In addition to the changes in tutorial processes, the interactive nature of the lectures also increased as a consequence of increased student engagement, with one student commenting, “there is now a lively atmosphere in the lectures, good teaching style, good communication and content explanation”.

In summary we believe that providing the students with learning environments that used both face-to-face and online technology founded with a problem-based case has provided superior learning outcomes and increased student engagement.
Concluding Remarks

Universities have rapidly embraced the use of computer and virtual technologies for the delivery of higher education. It is now commonplace for undergraduate subjects to have distinct online teaching sites, partly in order to satisfy the diverse needs of the student population, and partly to maximise the use of scarce resources (Kirkpatrick & Jakupec, 1999). Monitoring of this teaching approach indicates that an integration of both face-to-face and virtual technology has a number of advantages for dealing with large groups. However, the inclusion of new technology may be a double edged sword, while on the one hand providing the students with greater opportunity to make use of learning facilities; on the other hand it places even greater pressure on already stretched teaching staff to assist the students with understanding and making use of these new facilities.

References


### Appendix A

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERION</th>
<th>7 (HD)</th>
<th>6 (D)</th>
<th>5 (C)</th>
<th>4 (P)</th>
<th>3 (E)</th>
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<td>Part A: Decisions</td>
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<td>1.1 Descriptive Knowledge</td>
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<td>Correctly answers all questions. Offers effective solutions to improve the organisation’s competitive advantage.</td>
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<td>Consider all questions. Offers effective solutions to improve the organisation’s competitive advantage.</td>
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<td>Considers most questions accurately. Describes decisions that are possible, although not necessarily the most effective.</td>
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<td>Questions are not answered appropriately.</td>
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<td>Part B: Conceptual and operational justification</td>
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<td>Successfully arguments for decisions. Comprehensively analyses theoretical concepts/principles/models and critically examines the relationship between these concepts/principles/models and the decisions made.</td>
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<td>Clearly arguments for the decisions. Examines theoretical concepts/principles/models and implies a relationship between these concepts/principles/models and the decisions made.</td>
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<td>Attempts to provide an argument and rationale for the decisions. Examines theoretical concept/principles/models and describes the relationship between the decisions made and the concepts/models.</td>
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<td>Describes the decisions without developing a logical argument or rationale. Omit some aspects of the relationship between the decisions made and theoretical support. Does not integrate research effectively.</td>
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<td>Omit many relevant theoretical concepts/principles/models that support the decisions made. No evidence of integration of research.</td>
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<td>Part C: Strategic and operational integration</td>
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<td>Comprehensively and justifies decisions made based upon the organisation’s mission, objectives, strategy and operations.</td>
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<td>Thoroughly describes the decisions made based upon the organisation’s mission, objectives, strategy and operations. A high degree of alignment between decisions in each module.</td>
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<td>Identifies that decisions are made based upon the organisation’s mission, objectives, strategy and operations. Some incongruency between decisions made in modules.</td>
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<td>Does not provide evidence that decisions are made upon the organisation’s mission, objectives, strategy or operations. Many incongruencies between modules.</td>
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<td>Overall: Organisational and presentation</td>
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<td>3.1 PC-W</td>
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<td>Professionally presented with substantial attention to detail. Material is thoroughly, consistently and accurately referenced. The arguments is logically developed, coherent and structured. Contains a very high standard of grammar, syntax and spelling.</td>
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<td>Carefully and logically organized. Material is referenced accurately. The argument is clear, coherent and structured. Contains an average standard of grammar, syntax and spelling.</td>
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<td>Shows organization and coherence. Material is generally referenced accurately, although a number of errors and omissions are evident. The argument is clear at times, although the structure may be disjointed. Contains a standard of grammar, syntax and spelling.</td>
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<td>Shows some attempt to organize material. Some material is referenced. Some errors and omissions are evident. The arguments is clear at times, though the structure may be disjointed. Contains a slightly below standard of grammar, syntax and spelling.</td>
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<td>Lacks coherence and organization. Not all material referenced. Some errors and omissions. Argument not presented clearly. Contains some misunderstanding. Contains a very limited knowledge of grammar syntax and spelling.</td>
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<td>Disorganized and illogical arguments. Not much reference or omissions. Arguments contain misinterpretations. Contains a very limited knowledge of grammar syntax and spelling.</td>
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