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## **“FIRST IN LINE” STUDENT ASSESSMENTS OF PIONEERING EXAMPLES OF BLENDED LEARNING**

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### **Introduction**

This paper presents a study of how a cohort of students respond when they encounter a single module delivered via a blended/flipped learning approach at a point when the rest of their learning occurs in more traditional face-to-face learning environments. The study is based on a case study at the School of Communications, Dublin City University where the author has pioneered online delivery of module content blended with F2F moderation of small-scale seminar sessions based on the online content. The paper introduces the practical difficulties – for both tutor and student – of “being first” in the sense of creating course content and learning to interpret/process content delivered in a non-traditional fashion. The paper presents data on:

- student engagement based on seminar attendance rates,
- metrics on consumption of online videos,
- performance in assessment,
- feedback from questionnaires, and
- from small-scale focus groups.

### **Context for introducing online learning modes**

In September 2015, the current author introduced what constituted the first attempt to adopt a flipped classroom approach in his institution, the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Dublin City University. The motivation for this was partly derived from a strategic aspiration at an “official” (i.e. senior university management) level for staff to adopt blended learning methodologies with a view to improving student recruitment by offering more flexible delivery modes. However, the decision to “flip” was also driven by more pressing and pragmatic thinking. Although the post-2008 global recession has affected much of the western world, its effects were particularly acutely felt in the Republic of Ireland which in 2010, accepted a fiscal bailout from a troika constituted by the World Bank, the IMF and the European Union. Accessing bailout funds was conditional on achieving significant cuts in national public expenditure levels. This included cuts on funding to the Irish Higher Education Authority and, indirectly, to third level institutions: between 2008 and 2015, state funding for universities was cut by nearly 50%, leading to a decline in staff numbers (O’Brien, 2016). At the same time the total number of student attending third level increased from approximately 130,000 in 2009 to 147,000 in 2014. This has inevitably lead to larger class sizes.

Between 2009 and 2011 alone, according to the Irish Federation of University Teachers, the average staff:student ratio across third level institutions in Ireland rose from 1:19 to 1: 24.

In my institution, modules which were already taught to large groups (100 plus students), the additional increases in class sizes strained the physical capacity of the institution. For example, this writer witnessed one module for first year undergraduates on media history (CM137), grow from approximately 80 students in 2005 to 280 by 2013. Given the limited number of spaces capable of holding such numbers, that module was increasingly – but necessarily – timetabled in unpopular time slots (typically late on a Friday evening) with a deleterious impact on attendance. Post-semester focus groups exploring poor attendance found that timetabling issues exacerbated a sense of lecturer-student alienation caused by the large class sizes. Students complained that the large class size limited opportunities for lecturer-student engagement and that there was little sense that the lecturer and students were operating in a shared intellectual space: the lecturer was experienced as literally and figuratively distant. The resulting lack of engagement created serious attendance issues which seemed to have been – at least indirectly – correlated with worsening student performance in assessment.

## **Solution?**

Online delivery of lecture content appeared to offer the prospect of addressing the timetabling issues, allowing students the flexibility to choose the time, location and speed at which they consumed lecture content. However, cognizant of the potential for further disengagement stemming from an exclusive reliance on online means of lecture delivery, I considered how this might be addressed. Kim and Thayne (2015) emphasize how relationship-building strategies between instructors and learners can “positively relate with increased learning gains”. To that end, I decided to adopt a flipped approach. From September 2015, the previous 2-3 hour *live* CM137 lectures have been replaced with online lecture delivery. To build a direct relationship with the students, the lectures were augmented by weekly face-to-face seminars moderated by the course coordinator and built around questions relating to the previous week’s online lecture. Though still large (30 students), the seminar sessions not only dramatically increased the potential for instructor-student interaction but, *inter alia*, created an opportunity to build at least a minimal direct connection between Faculty and the students.

In contemplating the options for creating the online lectures I looked at existing literature on best practice and reviewed the options in Hansch et al.’s (2015) survey/assessment of different video and online learning methodologies. In this regard, the fact that I come from a film and television studies background but also that the audience for my content were media and communication students, arguably created a particular set of expectations regarding the quality and nature. In other words I assumed that, as individuals well-versed in screen culture, media students might be less tolerant of less-than-professional content. Based on responses to a number of short test videos, I abandoned the idea of creating *filmed lectures* (i.e. literally filming a live lecture and editing in accompanying Powerpoint material, as per content creation software like Panopto). In addition, bearing in mind Kouni’s (2006) argument that video in education is effective when its cognitive, experiential and nurturing qualities are

actively exploited, I decided on an online form which emphasized the audiovisual demonstration of core themes. The final result was a series of straight to camera talking head videos extensively augmented with audio, video, audiovisual, textual and hyperlink content. Thus the experiential value of video was exploited in a discussion of the revolutionary impact of the printing press illustrated with video of how Gutenberg’s original press actually operated. Similarly the nurturing potential of video was utilized when discussing the concept of commercial intertexts in mainstream cinema by filming myself opening a box of *Star Wars* toys from my own childhood.

Each lecture is broken down into a series of 6-20 minute duration video presentations which are “released” to students every Wednesday. Students can download the videos from the Loop page or watch them via a private Youtube page. This allows students to access the course content at a location, time and pace of their own choosing. The online videos are produced using Camtasia, which permits blending of straight to camera video and audio, Powerpoint presentations, web content etc. into a video presentation.

The key question addressed in the proposed paper is whether the adoption of this mode resulted in improved student outcomes. To this end, in addition to briefly recounting practical issues associated with adopting the flipped mode (in a university context where such modes are scarcely employed and where HR/workload policies remain grounded in an era of F2F teaching – i.e. where the labour involved in online content creation cannot be recognized and acknowledged) the paper will present metrics measuring the student experience of the flipped approach based on a multiplicity of perspectives:

1. Measurement of student attendance and participation in weekly face to face seminars.
2. Detailed analysis of student consumption of online videos (overall views, percentage of students watching the videos, percentage of videos watched to their conclusion etc.)
3. Anonymous student feedback through detailed module-specific online Survey of Teaching tool (with 72% response rate.)
4. Results of follow-up post-semester Focus groups with CM137 students to clarify and expand results of online Survey of Teaching tool.
5. Student performance in continuous assessment and exam assessment modes.

Without going into detail in this proposal, the results suggest that the experiment has been broadly successful in terms of engagement and learning outcomes. However, the experiment also highlights the practical issues raised for pioneers of such approaches in contexts where – official strategy notwithstanding – the institution has not developed new working structures in anticipation of the introduction of such delivery modes.

## References

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## **"First in Line" Student Assessments of Pioneering Examples of Blended Learning**

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