

Riding the carousel: Designing an online enabling program to maximise positive learner engagement and outcomes.

Dr Carolyn O'Dwyer
Tertiary Preparation Program, La Trobe University.

Abstract

As the body of research into student attrition and retention has developed, there has been more focus on how universities might craft courses to more flexibly meet the variable commitments of increasingly diverse learners. This paper reports on an initiative where a small scale enabling course was redesigned into a suite of modularised microsubjects offered on a carousel so students can rapidly adjust load or roll partial subject credits into the next study period. Learning components of the course are also free to circulate as mobile learning objects across other areas of the university. The pedagogical framing, educational design elements and intended impact of the redesign are discussed. The paper also shares some insights about piloting the implementation at the process level and opens questions about the way that rethinking the traditional bounds of educational offerings can broaden participation and support retention of enabling and other cohorts.

Context

A small scale enabling course (since 2012 allocated between 72 and 112 EFTSL per annum) historically provided a face to face learning environment to transition students without basis for university entry into tertiary study. Delivered on one regional campus from 1990, from 2012 it was expanded to three more regional campuses and to a low SES city fringe area through a council partnering agreement. In 2017, an external course review identified an opportunity for renewal and for scaling which would potentially also provide program sustainability in a labile and uncertain funding environment. Therefore, across 2017-2018 a complete redesign into a fully online program was undertaken. Redesign included:

1. Development of 18 x 5 credit point micro-subjects which students are supported to curate in a 60 credit point multidisciplinary combination to build learning capital and best meet academic needs and professional aspirations.¹
2. Offering a wide range of multiple modularised subjects through 6 online study periods, on a repeating carousel module to optimise choice and flexibility and provide continuous entry and exit points.
3. Design principles which allow each subject or modules/components within each subject to be extensively redeployed as mobile learning objects (learning support resources) within the course and across the university.

The first pilot cohort of full time students completed in late December 2018 and will transition to undergraduate study in 2019. This paper considers the intended impact of

¹ For the purposes of this redesign, microsubjects are measured at 5 credit points and provide an indicative student workload combining contact and non-contact study of 10 hours per credit point, consistent with La Trobe's Student Assessment Workload Guidelines.

redesign structure and offering. The paper also shares the pedagogical framing of the course and subject design elements with the intent of raising productive discussion about the way that rethinking the traditional bounds of educational offerings can broaden participation and support retention of enabling and other cohorts.

Rationale for program redesign

There are a range of enabling programs in Australian universities delivered in online, blended or face to face modes. Attrition is generally higher than in undergraduate programs and reflects the challenges which, over a number of years, have been broadly identified by many researchers as especially impacting enabling cohorts (Hodges et al., 2013; Morison & Cowley, 2017; Ramsay, Learning, & Teaching, 2013; Willans & Seary, 2018). Drawing on earlier work conducted by Yorke and by Weston (Weston, 1998; Yorke, 1998), a study conducted by Taylor and Bedford listed 15 reasons for students discontinuing. The dominant theme in this list is the gap between pressures of time (time availability, organisation and time management) and pressures of study (Taylor & Bedford, 2004). Supporting this finding, Whannell divided non-completing enabling students into two different groupings (Whannell, 2012). The first group was characterised by lack of impetus (indistinct goals impacting motivation and insufficient learning skills). The second group had been affected by shifting personal circumstances (including family, employment, income, health) which meant that they no longer had the time or resources to continue. The experience of the academic team tasked with teaching and redesigning this enabling program was highly consistent with this research, in particular with the high proportion of students whose progress was interrupted by chronic and acute mental ill health (Lisciandro, Jones, & Geerlings, 2018; Nicole et al., 2018)

The complex dimensions which intersect the lives of enabling students were therefore powerful drivers in conceptualising the design of the new online program. The rural/regional campus locales of the original face to face program also provided insight into localised variables: for example the way that opportunities for seasonal agricultural employment impacted the retention of students through a traditional semester offering. This further encouraged a rethink of how the offering could be structured so that it adapted more readily to the needs of a wide range of students. The carousel model with its flexible, continual repeat of subjects and short online study periods (six weeks of online teaching and a seventh week to complete final assessments) provided students with options for the rapid adjustment of study load and the capacity to ‘roll’ an incomplete subject into the next available study period without losing credit for learning already accomplished. By recognising and rewarding the learning achieved and by keeping students connected, the model also offers a practical alternative to the (personal, institutional and societal) financial and opportunity cost of ‘dropping out’ as well as the deficit discourse of failure attaching to student attrition (Harvey & Szalkowicz, 2017). A final and institutionally strategic design consideration was that online carousel delivery and the unbundling of student offerings to widen accessibility was closely aligned with core objectives of the university’s Draft Strategic Plan 2018 – 2022.

Design principles

Course design principles were therefore influenced by institutional imperatives and guided by research into enabling pedagogy, notably the pedagogy of care and the strengths based approach extensively reported on at the University of Newcastle (Bennet et al, 2018). Design was mediated as well by the historical and community significance of the program in the regional locations where it had traditionally been a recognised point of access to higher education. In these communities, the redevelopment of the course from face-to-face teaching

delivery to an online offering was largely read as a loss. As a way of supportively transitioning into the change, it was agreed to provide dedicated face to face learning support for enabling students on all campuses for a minimum of 2 hours per week as well as full access to all online and face to face university support services.

Following a range of consultation across multiple internal and external stakeholders the broad principles of the online redesign included the following:

1. A holistic design approach to the course overall so that all subjects – despite discipline difference – had a distinctive tone, look and feel in image and text, adding to a sense of course narrative progression and community belonging. This was a direct acknowledgement of the importance of images and narrative in developing a sense of belonging in students of all cultures (Andersen, Edwards, & Wolfe, 2017).
2. Accessibility to the highest level of WCAG 2.0 guidelines as well as an exceptionally high level of scaffolding (e.g.: interactive glossary for every subject) and detailed stepped out direction for each activity.
3. Consistent use of authentic student image, voice and video to sustain and further build the understanding of local learning community which had historically drawn students to the program and kept them engaged. Past enabling students were voluntarily recruited for recording sessions in which they provided accounts of their own learning journeys and generously shared their program learning experiences. Different images of all regional and metropolitan campuses were included. Key to this was a ‘people like me in places I know’ touchpoint removed from the glossier selected images available via institutional marketing.
4. Some vertical alignment of course subjects so that students could be advised to make progressive subject choices in the interests of foundation skill development. From 18 micro-subjects, organised into 6 discipline tranches, 3 foundation subjects (‘Tranche 1’) were developed in in the discipline spaces of mathematics, academic literacy and digital literacy. It was identified that not all students would need all of these subjects but that the majority would benefit by initially engaging in at least one Tranche 1 subject.
5. Horizontal alignment of learning activities in different course subjects to facilitate consistent iteration and consolidation of specific transferable learning skills across subjects so that these skills become familiar and embedded. This mapping was a direct response to research findings which indicate that the commitment and motivation of educationally disadvantaged students increase in direct correlation to their increasing mastery of core learning competencies (Engstrom & Tinto, 2008).
6. The provision of a personal learning space (PebblePad portfolio or Sway journal) in every subject to mirror subject learning in the LMS. Reflective practice opportunities (through targeted reflection questions) are repeatedly offered to allow students to work through content, participating in interactive learning in the LMS and recording personal learnings and discoveries in a journal.
7. High frequency, low stakes formative assessment leading to provision of detailed and personalised feedback – especially in the Tranche 1 subjects. This design decision was practically supported by the development of PebblePad workbooks which enable teaching staff to access student work in progress and provide input prior to assessment submission. The workbook initiative also gives students a sustainable resource to draw upon for their learning ongoing.

Practical implementation

The academic and educational designers understood from the outset that the system implementation of the carousel would require intensive planning and administration. At a university level this required alignments with the course management system, the student information system and the publicly published space of the online student handbook. It also required a detailed communication and information strategy to update university marketing and student administration. At a course level, each student is provided with a (generic) study plan on the basis of prior attainment and intended load. This has been a management tool at this pilot stage but will be reviewed as the course enters full delivery in mid-2019. As would be the case with any enrolled student, change of student load from this initial study plan is currently managed through student administration although advice and guidance is usually sought and/or provided by course coordinators. While this will require some resourcing, it has been counterbalanced by lack of attendance at scheduled face to face dedicated support sessions, meaning that these will be phased out and resourcing redirected as the pilot continues. It is noteworthy that the very few students who have attended these sessions were seeking English language support. A final point is that specific resources developed for subjects within the course have been accessed and deployed across other areas of the university both in learning support and in discipline courses.

Key questions to open discussion

The success of the initiative will be evaluated through analysis of comprehensive data on retention and transition. This will be comparatively assessed against data from the preceding face to face program. While the pilot status of this initiative means that longitudinal data on successful first year transition and retention will not be available until at least 2020, there are a number of key questions that the initiative raises for discussion.

- Should universities shift away from the fixed idea of ‘attrition’ into a more nuanced one that allows students to more flexibly move in and out, adjusting and integrating study with other life commitments? If so, how could it be practically administered?
- We are hypothesising that the enabling students who adapt to this flexible system will have acquired enough educational capital and self-knowledge to make sustainable choices (study load and self-management) at the undergraduate level. Is this a reasonable expectation?
- Given the blurred differentiation between enabling students and a high need undergraduate cohort (especially at universities servicing low SES communities) should there be a more porous movement between the cohorts: e.g.: if enabling students demonstrate academic capacity in a short period of time, should they be able to be fast tracked – especially given the cost of delivering enabling education?

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