

Hiccups and Hurdles: A “Warts and All” Look at the Online Revolution

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Abstract

Within tertiary education, online learning tools are being used with greater frequency than ever before. Online education has been hailed as a method of providing flexible education to first year students with complex family, work and social commitments. However, little research has been conducted looking at the pragmatic and pedagogical issues educators face when developing an online learning curriculum. This nuts and bolts session explores the unique challenges faced by staff at James Cook University when developing the first year of an online health degree. The interactive session will then go on to explore the key ethical and pragmatic issues faced by educators in developing online curricular in today’s working environment.

Objectives of Session

Participants will have the opportunity to:

- Brainstorm the ethical and pragmatic issues of online education
- Share their individual experiences of flexible online delivery
- Problem solve solutions to the new and unique challenges of online education
- Hear and learn from one university’s experiences of making the online transition

Background

The online revolution has been held as the answer to fulfilling our student’s educational and lifestyle needs. However, little discussion has focused on the pragmatic issues faced by educators who are championing the online revolution. Online flexible learning courses can provide innovative and practical learning environments for students. However, little is known about how educators cope with the transition.

Many questions in relation to staff needs have not yet been answered. How do staff who have just mastered the podcast communicate with the student who blogs, twitters and pokes? Is it essential for staff to be online savvy and to what extent is being tech-friendly now part of the job description? How do educators manage staff/student contact time which has no time or space limits?

As a strong believer interactive online university courses, this session's presenter took a humbling journey in 2008. Faced with the task of overseeing the transition of a practical health course into online mode for first year delivery, the excitement of the "*Flexible Learning*" paradigm lost its sparkle at times amongst the unsolved questions of staff. The uncharted hurdles and hiccups which led to staff becoming champions of online delivery is the basis of this session.

This Nuts and Bolts session will be comprised of two sections; a presentation and an interactive brainstorming sharing session. The presentation will introduce the unique questions raised by staff involved in the transition to online course delivery. The discussion will then lead into an interactive session where participants can share their own experiences and solutions to the challenges of the online revolution.

10 Minute Presentation Overview

"Oh My Gosh, What on Earth Have We Got Ourselves Into?"

The presentation will cover an overview of the challenges faced by staff at James Cook University when looking to develop an innovative online flexible delivery course for health students. This course was developed to meet the learning needs of both on and off campus students.

This presentation will focus on some of the unique hurdles faced by the project in regards to staff concerns. Some of the trickier issues (the "warts" of the project) will be discussed alongside the team's ultimate solutions. Lessons learnt from the process will be discussed. In particular the following will be discussed:

Time factor

A discussion of how online modes can both save time and add more work to an academics schedule.

New Technology

Important steps to overcoming staff fears in regards to online technology.

What do our students want?

The importance of staff understanding our student's flexible learning needs. Otherwise known as – 'The reason behind all our hard work'!

20 minute interactive session

Jumping the Hurdles and Curing the Hiccups

Following on from the presentation topics, the following issues will be brainstormed within small groups. Participants will self select which group they wish to merge into to discuss their topic of interest. This section of the session will focus on participants discussing particular issues within the topics and generating possible solutions or directions. Participants will then share their discussions and findings with the larger group as a whole at the end of the session.

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Issue 1: Job Description 101: Flexible Friendly?

This group focuses on discussing the issues around employer's expectation of staff skills around flexible online delivery. Questions that could be discussed include:

- Are flexibility and online technical skills an essential or desired part of today's job description?
- Can employers demand you to use certain tools? (ie: podcasting?)
- What responsibilities do universities have in producing flexible friendly staff?

Issue 2: "Video Killed the Radio Star" – Podcasting & Video challenges

This topic will focus on the pragmatic and ethical issues relating to digital media recordings which could include:

- Copyright: Who owns it? Who can distribute it? Can digital recordings be forwarded to media outlets?
- Pre-recorded vs. live recordings: Pros and Cons
- Privacy issues for students and guest lecturers with videoing
- Is videoing any better than the podcast or captured PowerPoint?

Issue 3: The Never Ending Story of Student Contact: Email, discussion boards, chat rooms, Twitter, wikis, blogs...

This topic will focus on the challenges of digital communication. Questions that could be discussed include:

- How much is enough? How is online versus face to face student contact time managed?
- How do we manage student expectations regarding staff contact?
- What are the most efficient online or digital communication techniques with today's first year students?
- How can students still feel part of a learning community when communicating digitally rather than face to face?

Presenter Details

Lynne is the Flexible Learning Coordinator for the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy (Flexible Delivery) course at James Cook University. This course is the first occupational therapy course in Australia to offer a flexible delivery mode. She has researched the flexible learning needs of her students and has an ongoing interest in how online course delivery can assist both internal and external students. She is interested in the process of staff development in regards to online and flexible learning pedagogies.

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