Case Study: Using Epigeum to support the journey toward blended, online and digital learning and teaching at Federation University

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Introduction

In 2014, Federation University (FedUni) embarked on an initiative to embed blended, online and digital (BOLD) learning and teaching across all courses within the University. In order to support an institution-wide approach to learning and teaching, a number of strategies were employed to support academic teaching staff in the transition from traditional face-to-face learning and teaching to a BOLD mode of flexible design and delivery. The utilisation of suites of online courses by Epigeum, including *Teaching Online* and *Blended Learning* was one of these strategies.

Objectives

In the short term, the use of *Teaching Online* was an avenue to provide a pedagogical foundation for learning and teaching in a BOLD environment, and to formulate evidence-based ideas for design and delivery. With the acquisition of *Blended Learning*, the medium to long-term goals extended to more specific strategies and opportunities to share successes and challenges in the move to blended learning and teaching. The use of both Epigeum online programmes over three years has undertaken a number of reiterations, based on the ongoing feedback from participants and the changing needs of academic staff.

Currently, both Epigeum programmes are utilised in a targeted manner to provide six stand-alone, online, facilitated short courses that provide fundamental pedagogies of learning and teaching within a BOLD environment. This format enables the use of best-practice resources, role modelling of quality facilitation of online teaching, opportunity for application of individual learning needs and demonstrates the creation of an online community of learning, specific to FedUni's context and needs.

Collaboration

In 2015, *Teaching Online* was introduced in Semester 1 and 2 as part of the Graduate Certificate in Education (Tertiary Education) (GCETE), and as a non-award course titled 'BOLD Fundamentals'. At this time, minimal attention was paid to online or blended learning within the GCETT, so this multi-pronged approach of delivery enabled staff to seek award or non-award recognition, depending upon their professional needs.

Both courses were run collectively using the university's Learning Management System to create a comprehensive online learning community. Evaluations undertaken at the end of each semester supported the quality of the online learning combined with the mix of blended activities and extension opportunities. Significant technological issues were however encountered, in relation to some components of the SCORM package not working, depending upon the internet browser or device used. Feedback also highlighted the theory-only limitations of the course and requested opportunities to apply their learning via the upskilling in learning technology tools. What was also noted was the poor attrition rate after Modules 2 and 3, with these staff citing workload issues or the timing of the course as reasons for not completing the full course.

To improve retention and provide stronger opportunities to complete all modules, the following year saw modules within 'BOLD Fundamentals' delivered over a one month period, offered across three intakes in the year to improve accessibility for participants and flexibility of completion. This allowed participants to complete a couple of modules, take a break and take up the next module when it was offered later in the year. Components of the SCORM package were embedded directly into Moodle to better engage with the learning activities and reduce the issues associated with varying internet browsers. Learning activities that improved skills related to learning technology use, and allowed direct application of learning were also introduced.
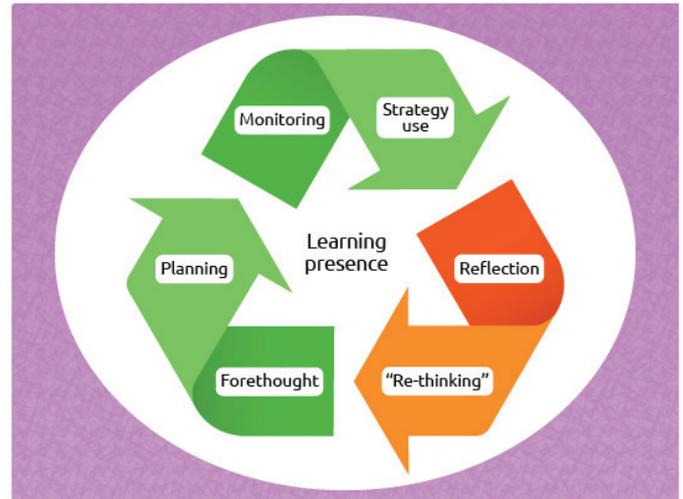
Whilst retention rates improved slightly, feedback continued to voice frustration over the high volume of content, repetition of some themes, and inability to determine what information was most important for their immediate learning needs.

During this time, FedUni was invited to participate in the development of video resources for *Blended Learning*, and was successful in having the work of three academic staff accepted. Having access to two Epigeum packages then became a challenge for how best to utilise the resources available in a way that would best suit the immediate and long-term needs of the academic teaching staff.

Implementation

In response to the participant feedback above, in 2017 the course was transformed into six stand-alone, facilitated short courses of 10 hours of learning each, rebadged as BOLD Short Courses 1 – 6. The content and learning activities within each short course included specific components of both *Teaching Online* and *Blended Learning*, in addition to open education and other online resources. This enabled each short course to be tailored to suit the specific context and learning needs of academic teaching staff. Opportunities were also provided to assist in skill development of learning technologies in order to provide the link between knowledge and skill to enable application into practice.

The redesign into short courses involved the collaboration of a learning designer, learning technology support and central learning and teaching lecturers. Each short course includes:

- 'Self-paced learning' (5 hours) for specific reference or relevance to BOLD learning and teaching at FedUni, using international best-practice resources. Individual learning activities are provided throughout to encourage role model reflection and interaction with a range of concepts.

- 'Communicative activities' (2.5 hours) provides opportunities to engage with peers to discuss, debate, create and collaborate to building a small online community of learning, and role model 'teacher presence' in an asynchronous environment.

- 'Consolidation and application activities' (2.5 hours) provides a virtual learning session to facilitate and role model synchronous opportunities to support the application of skills and knowledge learnt into practice, and the completion of a short quiz to receive recognition of course completion.

Each BOLD Short Course is facilitated online over a month. Weeks 1 & 2 are to complete the self-paced learning units, Week 3 to complete the communicative activities, and Week 4 to complete the consolidation and application activities, equating to 2.5 hours per week. Each short course was offered as per the learning and teaching cycle to accommodate 'just-in-time' information and support. For example Short Courses 1 – 3 focusing on the design phases of BOLD course development are offered in the months leading into a teaching semester, and Short Courses 4 – 6 focusing on the teaching phases of BOLD course delivery are offered during the months of the teaching semester.

David Nicol: adapted from 'Assessment and Feedback' and 'Clarify good performance', adapted from the REAP principles of good formative assessment and feedback from *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience* (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2009), reproduced by permission of the author.

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In addition, components of both *Teaching Online* and *Blended Learning* are embedded in the GCETE award program, and the BOLD Short Courses are open to any member of University staff who is interested in, or responsible for the delivery of any blended or online course, resource or learning package.

Results

Evaluation of impact is ongoing. Feedback on the course content, relevance to identified learning needs and quality of teaching has been sought after each reiteration of the course – from inception of using *Teaching Online* in its entirety, through to the current BOLD Short Courses that utilise relevant content and activities of both Epigeum packages. Resonant throughout the feedback is the quality of learnings within both packages to support the pedagogical foundations of blended and online learning and teaching. What has been challenging is getting the balance right between the knowledge of what to do, the skill of how to do it, and the application of that to individual and faculty online and blended learning and teaching practices.

Whilst formal studies of the impact of the BOLD Short Courses, and subsequent use of Epigeum resources, on the student learning experience are pending, what has been evident is the increased engagement of participants with additional support after the course, to apply their learnings. Participants are more likely to access the use of learning designers, central learning and teaching lecturers, learning technology support, learning skills advisers, and online self-paced resources to support ongoing course design and delivery.

Conclusion

Strategic use of specific Epigeum content and activities within targeted short courses and programmes continues to be of relevance to and supportive of the Universities BOLD initiative. With the challenge of determining the right mode and model of delivery getting closer to addressing specific learner needs, the next step is formally evaluating the impact of staff engagement with these courses on the quality of online and blended teaching, and subsequently the impact on successful online and blended student learning.