Engaging First Year Students with an Effective Learning Environment: Combining Laurillard’s Conversational Framework and Active Learning with Blended Delivery

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Abstract

This paper discusses an innovative approach to engaging students in two large core compulsory first year units. The approach aims to provide an effective learning environment that promotes student engagement by combining Laurillard’s conversational framework, a commitment to active learning, and a blended delivery method. The paper explains our approach, the theory that sustains it, and details some of the student responses to it.

Introduction

At the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) our Teaching Capabilities Framework articulates four dimensions of teaching practice (QUT, 2004a, 2). The first of these is ‘engaging learners’. We are encouraged to achieve learner engagement through, amongst other things, “implementing a range of learning strategies and techniques that foster deep learning and interaction” (QUT, 2004a, 4-5). QUT’s 2004 Blueprint also articulates a commitment to increasingly using information and communication technology to “transform our teaching and learning in ways which engage and challenge students, and which enable different learning environments” that can be “complementary and mutually reinforcing” (QUT, 2004b, 4).

This paper documents our collaboration as ‘co-lecturers’ or rather ‘learning facilitators’ that implemented in the classroom the institutional commitments found in the Teaching Capabilities Framework and the Blueprint. Our collaboration sought to engage first year students using Laurillard’s conversational framework (2002) and active learning; and also to engage first year students by transforming a traditional lecture/tutorial mode of delivery into a flexible student learning environment based on a blended face to face (f2f)/online approach. Our intention capitalised on the opportunities for increasing first year student engagement through conversational activity and conversation, as well as through computer-based learning technologies (DEST, 2002). In this paper we first explain the context of, and impetus for, our collaborative endeavour. Second, we discuss the approach and its core components. Third, we consider how this approach results in effective learning for students through enhancing student engagement. Finally, we discuss some student responses to the approach.

The context of the collaboration
Our collaboration took place in two units entitled Law and Government and Politics of Law in the Faculty of Law, QUT in 2005. The content of these units is often considered (at least by the students) to be relatively ‘dry’ and ‘dull’ as the focus is on introducing the law, and legal and political institutions. The units are core first year compulsory units in the Bachelor of Justice. Law and Government is taught in the first semester, Politics of Law in the second. The latter unit builds on concepts and knowledge developed in the first. There are usually about two hundred students (internal and external) enrolled each year. The units are considered foundational to understandings in subjects across the justice curriculum; it is therefore important, and yet difficult, to ensure that we engage the students in order to enhance their learning outcomes.

Since 1991 these units have been taught in a traditional lecture/tutorial format. For many years this involved a one hour lecture followed by numerous offerings of two hour tutorials. This was considered to be financially inefficient, and lecture and tutorial attendance rates were often not reflective of students placing a high value on this significant amount of face-to-face (f2f) contact. More recently the units have been taught with a two hour lecture and one hour tutorials. This improved resource efficiency, but attendance at lectures and tutorials continued to drop significantly after (usually) week 5 or 6. Whilst evaluations of the units were consistently sound, and achievement in assessment fell across an appropriate range of grades, our reflections on the apparently low levels of student engagement created an imperative for reform.

The reform process was staggered over the two semesters. That is, in the first semester we replaced lectures and tutorials with weekly two hour large group active learning workshops based on Laurillard’s conversational framework. There were no tutorials. Students’ f2f learning was completed with one trip to campus for the two hour session. We chose not to introduce the blended aspect of the model in first semester as we considered the students to be at too early a stage in their academic learning to cope with such a high level of responsibility for independent learning. Our view was also that the students had too many other transitional issues they needed to focus on, and we valued the opportunity to model effective approaches to learning for students in their first semester in higher education. Our approach is explained further in the following section.

A teaching delivery model to engage first year students

The teaching delivery model developed to better engage first year students is comprised of four key integrated components. These are: Laurillard’s conversational framework, a commitment to active learning (f2f and online), the use of a blended learning environment, and a unit workbook that fulfills a unit content ‘information provision’ function.

Achieving engagement through a conversational framework

The first key element of our approach is the explicit use of Laurillard’s ‘conversational framework’ that provides a clear structure, and theoretical foundation, to enhancing student engagement through creating a more effective learning environment. This framework is at the centre of f2f and online learning activity. The explicit theoretical
grounding of the teaching method in Laurillard’s ‘conversational framework’ is in “iterative dialogue”, and learning through conversation that is “discursive, adaptive, interactive and reflective” (Laurillard, 2002, 86-89).

The conversational framework “situates learning as a relationship between the learner and the world, mediated by the teacher” (Laurillard, 2002, 86). Pask formalized the idea of learning as a conversation in Conversation Theory (Pask, 1976), but it has been adopted by many others (Laurillard, 2002, 87). The framework allows learning dialogue to be simply about former experience or thought experiments rather than action-in-the-world (Laurillard, 2002, 88). Yet the most significant aspect of the innovation of our approach was introducing two facilitators into the classroom who could converse with each other about real world professional perspectives. This added a significant fourth dimension to engaging the students and thereby enhancing their learning outcomes.

The conversational experience in the f2f environment involves, then, in our approach, dialogic interaction on varied levels – we model professional conversation and debate as co-facilitators, students talk with us and with each other, and students develop internal conversations in the classroom (and outside of it) in their own reflections. Conversations are structured using, for example, large group questioning, small group discussion, ‘buzz groups’, one to one conversations, and individual thinking time (Cannon and Newble, 2000, 72-74). In the online context these activities are extended to conversation through writing. The online discussions focus on collaborative yet individually timed contributions that evidence students taking “time to be reflective and provide well-thought-out answers” (Bender, 2003, 65). The use of the conversational framework means also that learning in both the f2f and online contexts is neither pressured nor intimidating (Hativa, 2000). In both the f2f and online environments the topics for conversations are taken from the unit workbooks.

Achieving engagement through active learning

The second component of the approach involves ensuring that all aspects of the learning environment are focused on active learning (Gibbs, 1982; Hativa, 2000). Active student learning is a key facilitator of deep learning (Laurillard, 2002, 13 referring to the work of Vygotsky, Piaget, Bruner and Papert), and we know that student learning is enhanced when we “plan for learners’ active participation and engagement in the learning process by adopting learner-centred approaches.” (QUT, 2004a, 4) Large group expository lectures do not facilitate deep level learning (Ramsden, 1992, 101) because they do not encourage active participation and engagement. Our approach therefore rejects traditional expository lectures and focuses on socio-constructivist theories that confirm the importance of community and interactive forces to motivation (Wlodkowski, 1999, 8). Activity, and in particular conversational activity, is therefore central, to engaging students (Dunkin, 1983, 75; Cannon, 1988, 3).

The f2f workshops (weekly in the first semester and fortnightly in the second semester) are designed to use active engagement to build a strong, trusting, enthusiastic, motivating learning environment to encourage deep learning and establish a committed learning collective. For example, in the large workshop we use various active learning
techniques that might usually be found in the tutorial environment. Students are variously involved in resolving individual thinking points, in problem-solving with a neighbour, and in debating issues in larger groups. We show videos and as a large group discuss and unpack them. We use powerpoint summaries to provide a visual focus and summary for spoken interaction. We write collective notes and summaries in class – on the large screen and often with a volunteer student as note taker. These notes are later added to the unit’s website. We use two roving microphones to ensure all students have a chance to speak, be heard clearly and to interact, both with us and with each other. These microphones also link to an audiostream of the lecture which students can access from the website. A critical factor in this activity is the absence of any imperative to focus on information provision, as this is already achieved through the written workbook.

The organic balance of personalities and interactions in the large group is key to facilitating activity that effectively engages. Of particular importance is the balance offered by the presence of two facilitators. That is, it is critical to achieving high level student engagement in a large group approach to active learning that the facilitators are themselves active and engaged. Our key roles as facilitators include: communicating effectively with students (Salmon, 2000, 41); modeling effective approaches to learning (Bender, 2003, 54); facilitating and encouraging motivation (Wlodkowski, 1999; Donald, 1999, 27; Keller, 1987); personalizing the learning experience (Bender, 2003, 11, 31); and giving timely and appropriate feedback (Bender, 2003, 31). Our attention to the student as an individual, and to the encouragement and stimulation of their active learning (Bender, 2003, 12, 63) is at the core of these roles.

The fortnightly online discussions in the second semester unit also use conversational activity to engage students, with discussion fora being the focal point for online learning and interaction. Discussions are not assessed, and participation is voluntary. The active presence of learning facilitators in online learning is also particularly critical. Slack, Beer, Armitt and Green (2003) have found that online discussion can facilitate deep learning but only in circumstances of effective instructor facilitation and support. Salmon describes a facilitator’s role in relation to online learning as being to “take control, make it good, make it real and make it worthwhile” (Salmon, 2000, 98).

Achieving engagement through blending f2f and online approaches to learning

The third component of the model (introduced only into the second semester unit) involves using a blended approach to the student learning environment. This is consistent with the need to “structure learning environments that take into account conditions of learning” and to “promote learners’ self-responsibility in learning by providing balance between structure and freedom” (QUT, 2004a, 5).

The decision to use a blended online and f2f learning and teaching model for first year students was made carefully. Whilst “technology-supported learning environments offer many opportunities for both teachers and learners” (Oliver, 2000, 157), blended learning models are clearly not suitable for all class types, student cohorts or subject domains. In this project we used Wells and Field’s (2003) four key areas to decide on the suitability of implementation of a blended approach: the nature of the student body;
the level of study; the nature of the unit material; and the nature of assessment required to meet unit and course objectives.

Briefly, in terms of the nature of the student body and the level of study, key consideration was given to the fact that most of our students are school leavers in their first year of study. The high level of computer literacy amongst this cohort meant we could be confident of students having the necessary skills to support a blended approach. For those who didn’t have these skills, as online activity was not assessed, active engagement was still possible in the form of observing and reflecting on the activity of their peers. The need for a high level of personal interface to learning for school-leaver first year students meant, however, that this confidence related only to their learning in the second semester of their first year. The nature of the unit material involved a combination of theoretical content about legal and political issues with a practical understanding of how the law and politics play out in society. The blended approach offered a chance for independent learning, for example, of theoretical aspects of the unit material, and for that to be supported by regular f2f opportunities to unpack, explore and understand the theory in its practical application. The nature of assessment in the units aimed predominantly to ensure a foundational standard of knowledge and conceptual understanding. This was tested via take-home exams, reflective journals and end of semester exams, which fitted appropriately into the blended structure.

Our learning design of the blended approach was based on our knowledge of the students’ learning development over the course of the first semester. Our focus was on ensuring a quality yet flexible student-centred learning environment, and this we saw as enhancing independent learning skills. The blended approach is explicitly explained, unpacked and negotiated with students early in the semester to achieve a collective understanding of, and commitment to, its student learning objectives (Campbell-Gibson, 2000, 157). Anecdotal comments from students confirm a high level of ‘buy-in’ in terms of the learning potential of the approach. Students in the 2005 cohort indicated that they valued the way in which the approach recognized and responded to both their learning and their life needs. We considered the apparently high level of student engagement with the learning design as a positive indicator for their engagement with learning in the unit.

Achieving increased engagement by providing unit content through a written workbook

The fourth component of the model is an anchor in the form of a unit workbook that follows a weekly, structured approach to comprehensively detailing unit content in a relatively informal, (again) conversational written style. The workbook fulfils the ‘information provision’ aspect of the delivery of the unit by providing students with the entire unit content, key summaries, readings, thinking points and discussion questions. The workbook is designed to allow a focus in the active learning opportunities of the unit (f2f and online) on content and concept understanding. In effect, the workbook acts as an explicit foundation for learning in the unit, and is an integrated primary learning tool that supports positive student learning outcomes. Our provision of such a learning resource has been used as a model in other Faculty units.
Encouraging first year student engagement by creating a more effective learning environment

As the detail of our approach indicates, above, providing an effective learning environment is central to achieving our aim of increased student engagement. That is, the hypothesis of our learning design is that making effective student learning possible (Laurillard, 2002, 11; Ramsden, 1992, 5) increases the prospect of improving student engagement. The sections below connect our model with notions of effective learning.

Effective learning

As learning facilitators creating an effective learning environment requires us to take responsibility for being student-centred and encouraging high level cognitive engagement with unit content and concepts (Dunkin, 1983, 75; Cannon, 1988, 3). It is also our responsibility to motivate students to learn (Wlodkowski, 1999), and to provide learning experiences that engage with students’ different learning styles and preferences. As the Teaching Capabilities Framework for QUT puts it, we engage students and enhance their learning when we “design learning experiences that cater for a range of learning styles, provide a frame of reference for learning, and contribute to higher levels and improved quality of interaction” (QUT, 2004a, 4). In short, the imperative created is to achieve effective learning through effective teaching.

Ramsden articulates six key principles of effective teaching in higher education that can act as indicators of achieving effective learning (Ramsden, 1992, 86). These principles are used here to demonstrate how the design of this approach to teaching first year students was specifically targeted at creating an effective learning environment that engages students.

Ramsden’s first principle focuses on interest and explanation. Effective teaching ensures student interest and thereby engagement (which includes making learning a “pleasure”) through skilled explanation (Ramsden, 1992, 96). In our approach, the unit workbook, and the f2f and online active learning sessions were designed to work together to achieve skilled explanation of content and concepts in the unit, resulting in interest and engagement. In our view, the use of the conversational framework made this possible. The framework also legitimises the connection between f2f and online student learning experiences, thus sustaining student interest through a relatively seamless approach to the various environments in which explanation occurs. Our approach to clarity of explanation extends to gaining student interest in the learning model. That is, we help students to see how they could learn effectively in both f2f and online environments by explaining the conceptual framework (active conversation) in a way that “makes sense” to them, and is relevant to their learning.

Ramsden’s second principle of effective teaching in universities relates to having concern and respect for students and student learning. For effective learning to occur it is considered necessary that teachers are considerate of students (Ramsden, 1992, 97). Concern for students can create an imperative for their engagement with taking responsibility for being independent learners. Our approach focuses on explicit and personal (f2f and online) communication with students to demonstrate our respect and
concern in the form of a commitment to facilitating optimal learning outcomes for them. Negotiations and consultations occur with students about the teaching approach and about assessment design. Students are surveyed both informally and formally, about the effectiveness of the approach, and their levels of engagement with it. Student feedback is integrated as far as possible into their experience of the implementation of our approach, and efforts are made within the context of the units to ‘close the loop’ on student feedback to demonstrate how student contributions have been valued (Kift and Nulty, 2002).

The third principle of effective teaching in tertiary environments, according to Ramsden, concerns the provision of appropriate assessment and feedback. Certainly our experience concurs with the theoretical position that assessment is a process of critical importance in defining student approaches to learning (Biggs, 1999), and that assessment plays a prominent role in “influencing what students learn and the scope and extent of their learning” (Oliver, 2004, 6). Our approach to engaging students through assessment, is predominantly to focus on connecting the assessment tasks (take-home exams, reflective journals and exams) to unit objectives, and through being explicit about what is being asked of students in assessment and why. We considered it important to use the assessment framework to demonstrate clearly to students that assessment was a part of effective student learning in the unit, and not merely an “endpoint of demonstration of performance or capability” (Oliver, 2004, 6). The assessment process was therefore used “as the servant rather than the master of the education process” (Ramsden, 1992, 186). Ramsden comments also, in relation to the assessment feedback aspect of this third principle, that “of all the facets of good teaching that are important to (students), feedback on assessed work is perhaps the most commonly mentioned” (Ramsden, 1992, 99). Hisham, Campton and FitzGerald (2004, 5) also note the importance of providing formative feedback to students about their online learning. We ensured feedback was given in both f2f and online environments as fully as possible – again using conversation as a key tool.

Ramsden’s fourth principle relates to achieving effective learning by ensuring that students are given clear goals and intellectual challenge (Ramsden, 1992, 100). In our approach, explicit communication with students about our expectations of both ourselves and of them in the learning environment makes this possible. The conversational framework helps clarify learning goals, for the classroom, online and in assessment. It also helps achieve a high level of understanding of the connection between the goals and objectives of the units, and our goal to teach effectively (Biggs, 1999).

Ramsden’s fifth principle concerns the creation of a learning environment that encourages independence, control and active engagement. This principle supports cooperative learning over competitive, individualistic learning (Ramsden, 1992, 101). In our approach, the focus on discursive, active and collaborative learning engages students with “the content of learning tasks” in a way that enables them “to reach understanding” (Ramsden, 1992, 100). We promote student independence by encouraging students to become active-learners in their own right (Sheffield, 1974). Laurillard’s conversational framework, in both the f2f workshops and the online
discussion environment, necessitates student activity through conversation. As a result, learning is “lively, dynamic, engaging and full of life” (Cannon and Newble, 2000, 71).

The sixth principle identified by Ramsden is that of ensuring that teachers learn from students. As Ramsden comments, “good teaching is open to change: it involves constantly trying to find out what the effects of instruction are on learning, and modifying that instruction in the light of the evidence collected” (Ramsden, 1992, 102). The approach to teaching articulated in this paper derived from a reflective attitude to our teaching and a commitment to improving first year student learning outcomes through enhancing engagement. A reflective approach such as this demonstrates to students that effective teaching occurs as a result of being informed by, and responsive to, their needs.

Some student responses

Space does not allow for a full discussion here of student responses to our approach. Overall the response was very positive. In brief we gathered student feedback predominantly through informal and formal evaluations, and via email.

In the first semester unit of 2005 there were 184 students. Of this cohort, 53 students responded to an online evaluation conducted mid-way through the semester. 71.7% of the students who responded rated the unit in an overall sense as good or very good; and 81.2% either agreed or strongly agreed that the teaching, learning and assessment tasks were used by the teaching staff in ways to help students learn. Qualitative comments about the first semester approach also demonstrated strong support for the levels of engagement it encouraged. For example, student comments included: “It’s great to be able to contribute freely and openly in a large group”; “everyone gets involved and we learn from others in the class”; “the interactive format encourages people to attend”; “it’s a positive, enthusiastic learning environment”; “it’s easy to ask questions and good to get answers from two teachers”.

An online evaluation was also conducted for the second semester unit. The response rate was poorer – 22 students from a cohort of 180 - an insufficient response from which to draw broad conclusions. However the reaction was positive from those who chose to respond. In particular, for example, 73% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the teaching staff were friendly, enthusiastic and helpful to their learning; 82% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the workbook helped them to learn; and 73% of students agreed or strongly agreed that teaching staff showed a genuine interest in their learning and learning needs. In terms of the blended aspect of the unit, students who were troubled (silenced) by the large group nature of the f2f interaction fed back that they felt more comfortable conversing online (indeed our experience was that these students dominated online discussions). Students also felt it positive that the discussions held online worked as “instant written notes” for issues and concepts for learning in those weeks. In addition, students felt that they were able to engage more deeply online because they had more time to construct their contributions than existed in the more spontaneous f2f environment.
Conclusion

Laurillard’s view is that “university teachers must take responsibility for what and how their students learn” (Laurillard, 2002, 7), and undoubtedly, tertiary institutions in Australia are assuming “more accountability for their learning programs” (Oliver, 2004, 5). Students are, rightly, demanding that their higher education responds to their needs and contexts. In this environment, passive approaches to student learning fail. They do not provide for effective learning, largely because they do not engage. This is particularly true for students at the start of their academic career, in their first year.

“Higher education cannot change easily. Traditions, values, infrastructure all create the conditions for a natural inertia,” (Laurillard, 2002, 3) and the stakes and costs of innovation are high (Salmon, 2000, 89). The approach described and advocated in this paper is only one possible method of changing first year teaching practice to increase engagement. It represents, however, an attempt to do more than simply respond to economic and political imperatives that seem currently to dominant learning and teaching issues in higher education. Rather it has embedded within it a commitment to improving student learning outcomes through focusing on effective teaching practice in order to achieve greater student engagement.

References


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