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Teaching Shakespeare through blended learning. A Practice Report

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Abstract

This paper describes and discusses experimentation with the use of blended learning in teaching Shakespeare. Previous iterations of the subject in a traditional lecture and tutorial format had seen a decline in student attendance and a fall in student achievement at the higher grade levels. A further complicating issue was the range of expectations from the cohort, which comprised students from Creative Writing, Drama, and Education, a factor which also highlights the cross-disciplinary nature of teaching Shakespeare. A blended learning and lectorial format was employed to facilitate small group discussion of the plays in conjunction with a wider social and historical overview. Student feedback indicated that the changes to the delivery method were received positively, although some questions do remain concerning levels of student engagement and the specific disciplinary needs of student cohorts. The findings of the teaching of this subject will translate usefully to other fields and disciplines, especially as more and more subjects take up blended learning. The findings indicate that it is not enough to take up new technologies in the teaching of a unit. The learning environment must also be rethought and reconceptualised.

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Context

This practice report examines issues arising from attempts to incorporate blended teaching into units that have been traditionally taught in a lecture/tutorial/examination format. The ongoing outcomes from this project will enable transferrable themes and principles of practice to be applied to other units and teaching practices. The case study for this paper was the teaching of Shakespeare to a university (college) level class with students from a variety of backgrounds and undertaking different courses: Creative Writing, Drama, Acting, and Education. The subject is KWB 209 (Shakespeare, Then and Now) and is taught at Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The unit has been offered since 2002, with regular changes to the reading list to ensure that the plays on the unit do not become static or stale.

The unit's curriculum focuses on plays (rather than poetry), and is exclusively Shakespeare-focused, rather than incorporating wider English Renaissance/Early Modern playwrights. This choice was made so that students gain some expertise in a detailed area while also learning skills to apply to other writers from this and other periods. The plays studied are a mix of comedy, history, tragedy, and romance to showcase Shakespearean diversity of content and concerns (race, gender, theatrical tropes, politics, etc). We have also selected a mixture of plays most students have encountered (*Hamlet*) and ones that are less familiar (*The Winter's Tale*). This choice was made so that students could reflect on their existing knowledge and combine it with new knowledge to complete the assessment items. This process reflects the principle expounded by Andrew Gibson, Kristy Kitto and Peter Brunza (2016) in their research that states that it is important for students to undertake deep reflection which involves, "learners critiquing their pre-existing knowledge based on new information" (p. 26).

One of the major issues in the delivery of the unit is the mixed set of student expectations and requirements, especially so from the Education cohort who need content knowledge to teach the material after graduation. Because of this need, many of the Education students have a different focus in their expected outcomes. These students want to have lesson plans provided to them in class, which they may take into the future in their teaching careers. While this unit is not run through the Education Faculty, and focuses on content rather than Shakespeare pedagogy, it was still important that the teaching team appreciated and considered the concerns of these students, for as Ruth Bridgstock, Ben Goldsmith, Jess Rodgers, and Greg Hearn (2015) showed in their research into graduate outcomes, "Higher education can do more than it does presently to smooth graduates' transitions into the workforce" (p. 340). Creative Writing students, however, have no need for lesson plans or teaching strategies, but are more likely to enrol based on Shakespeare's canonical status as one of English Literature's most dominant writers. Drama students have a different set of expectations and demands again, as this cohort's interest lies primarily in performance practices and stage histories of the various plays. Negotiating this complex set of demands and expectations presents the teaching team with a unique set of challenges.

The motivations for change

The unit had been taught for a number of years via the traditional lecture and tutorial style, with ongoing assessment during the semester (a research essay) and a central exam at the end of the semester. However, the teaching team, via observation, student feedback and peer reviews, had noticed that as the years moved on there was a growing issue with attendance and engagement levels. These have been in decline for some time, manifesting in poor attendance levels in lectures and tutorials. This tailing off was reflected in the grade distribution, which

over the past five years has seen a reduction in students performing at the High Distinction and Distinction levels. The number of High Distinction and Distinction grades had been falling since 2010; grades at the Pass and Credit levels were reasonably steady; but the Fail grades had shown a slight increase. These results indicated that students were doing the minimum to pass the unit (and not always meeting that standard), but were consistently not engaging at a higher level. The increase in the Failure rates was attributable to students not submitting all of their assessment items, which is also indicative of a lack of engagement in both assessment tasks and in the unit material overall. The literature (Barton & Ryan, 2014; Purvis, Aspden, Bannister & Helm, 2011; Walters, Silva & Nikolai, 2017) acknowledges that assessment is a prime motivator in student engagement, yet also a source of student anxiety. Cathcart and Neale (2012) write about assessment and student satisfaction: “It is widely accepted that in higher education, assessment drives learning. However, recent research has noted that students’ experience of the assessment process is the aspect about which they are least satisfied” (p. 13).

The problem we faced as educators then was: How do we engage students in content, discussion and assessment when Shakespeare is perceived by them as “difficult”, “hard to understand” or “not relatable” (Mead, 2014) Mead addressed this problem of the appreciation of Shakespeare by focussing on moving beyond the “the scourge of relatability”, to acknowledge that identification with a character or issue of the play can well be where students’ engagement with the material begins, but such a moment must not be where critical thought ends. Students therefore have to be guided through seemingly non-relatable issues such as aspects such as language, historical context, and political questions of the time that are now invisible or unknown to many students, such as the multiple causes of the Wars of the Roses and the familial relationships at the heart

of that conflict. Also present in the unit here, as well as more widely, is the notion of Shakespeare as a cultural icon or weapon who is *supposed* to be mysterious and remote. Therefore, before students attend one class they have already perceived that this will be a difficult unit with challenging content.

Iterations of the unit over the past couple of years increasingly showed that the teaching staff had to change the structure of the unit and its delivery, as these no longer suited students’ preferred forms of engagement. As Ryan (2015) observes, “An understanding of how students learn in different ways is paramount” in a teaching environment (p. 10), an understanding that has become more pressing recently with shifts in delivery modes. Research indicates that blended learning and teaching are invaluable for the satisfaction and enjoyment of material and enhance the learning experience. (Barton & Ryan, 2014). Therefore, the unit was restructured to incorporate more collaborative team teaching and more options for learning, be they face-to-face or digital. Instead of having tutorials with one tutor leading the discussion and those present in the tutorial (often in diminishing numbers) reluctant to speak, we had all four teaching members present throughout the lectorial and the seminars for a unit enrolment of 90 students. This method was implemented to challenge issues of separation as the blended technique allows for more focused and small group discussions.

The teaching practice was predicated on a collaborative learning model for blended environments (So & Brush, 2008), informed by methodological questions highlighted in the literature for a more holistic approach to the study of such environments (Biluc, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007). Classes began with a ‘traditional’ overview of the period and the text, which was then followed by small group discussion (the number of students present were divided by four and split into separate discussion groups), then wider group de-brief at the conclusion of

the session. The focus thus split between the helicopter view of the play and associated issues, and the close reading of the text itself. Small group discussion allowed for personal responses and questions about the texts, as well as providing the opportunity to raise issues with comprehension of the language and content of the set play for the week. The small group discussions also gave students a sense of intimacy and belonging in the classroom. This style enabled the teaching team to get to know the students and for the students to share peer-to-peer feedback in a more relaxed and informal environment. Research from Monash University has found that peer-to-peer conversations increase “participants’ confidence and competence in spoken English and Intercultural communication” (McFarlane, Spes-Skrbis, & Taib, 2017, p. 107).

There is a great deal of research on teaching Shakespeare to high school students and even to primary school students (see, for instance, Mellor & Patterson, 2000). There are also many books and articles on teaching Shakespeare to university drama and acting students. There is, however, little research on teaching Shakespeare at universities to a diverse cohort and on using blended and/or flipped classrooms. This is slowly beginning to change. For instance, Christine Evain and Chris De Marco’s (2016) recent article “Teaching Shakespeare in the Digital Age: The eZoomBook Approach” examines how blending digital teaching methods aided in their teaching of Shakespeare to Engineering students. They used an eZoomBook to encourage, “a more active role during the learning process” (p. 164). One of the commonalities between their findings and what we are discovering in our classrooms is the question: What is the right blend between traditional and innovative methods of teaching?

Successes of Blended Learning

Blended learning is the use of online tools and resources blended with more conventional methods of teaching but it is also approaching teaching in a different way. However, the research suggests that blended learning has to extend beyond merely taking up new technologies and incorporate a reconceptualisation of the curricula and learning environments (Walters et al., 2017). Some of the outcomes of the blended learning approach that were successful included that small group discussion proved to be more rewarding and focused than tutorials, given that student engagement seemed higher. The teaching team did note that attendance did start to fall away towards the end of semester, which is common during times when assessment demands are heavy. This is an ongoing problem and one that the teaching team is trying to address, but is also an issue that cannot be entirely controlled given that students have three other units in their programme with varying assessment deadlines.

Class attendance does, therefore, remain an issue that needs to be addressed. Our institution’s policies here preclude assessment geared towards attendance and participation, which means that students cannot be allocated a percentage of their final grade for their attendance and discussion in class. Given the absence of this ‘carrot’ to attend class, student will sacrifice class time as the semester progresses in order to meet other commitments, both academic, and extra-curricular. The blended option also confirmed our observations in other classes we teach, namely that some students do not attend any classes whatsoever, and follow the material in varying degrees of engagement and detail without attending any physical classes. The Blackboard interface does provide data on students who follow the digital version of the unit, participation in which was sometimes disappointingly low.

Student feedback via QUT's Pulse survey (a survey which is run in Weeks 3–5 of semester) and Insight survey (an end-of-semester student satisfaction survey) was generally positive. Of the 83 students enrolled in the cohort, 21% responded to the first survey (the Pulse), and 33% responded to the Insight survey. The Pulse responses showed that 68% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the unit offered good learning opportunities, while 63% agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the unit. By the time of the later survey, satisfaction rates were slightly lower, which we attribute to students' receiving their assessment back and end-of-semester fatigue. Qualitative feedback revealed some complaints about not having access to the small-group discussions: this raises one of the tensions inherent in blended formats, in that some forms of in-person learning do not translate to on-line environments. Recording small group discussions does pose questions of student privacy, for instance, in that students may not wish to have their comments recorded. On a pedagogical note, the purpose of small-group discussion is exchange, clarification, and debate, so the value of asynchronous participation in such exchanges is somewhat moot. Students wanted access to what was being said in the actual physical discussions, although it is not clear how this would be of value as a learning experience or tool. This is an area that demands further research. One way to address this student concern may be to offer virtual discussions, either synchronous or asynchronous.

Future Considerations

This approach will be trialled again in the next iteration with some adjustments. Student feedback needs to be incorporated in future planning of the unit, even those elements of the feedback that are critical. One of the common criticisms as previously discussed was from the Education students who wanted more advice on how to teach Shakespeare to their future

students. This unit is not an Education unit, and while we did have links to lesson plans on the Blackboard site for students to consult and download, students clearly still felt strongly about this issue. One way we intend to address this issue is by inviting a staff member from Education to advise students how to implement lesson plans from the content they are learning in order to better demonstrate the nexus of how content informs pedagogy. This approach would not only address student concerns, but also bring in collaborative, team teaching from across different faculties. This also highlights the cross-disciplinary nature of learning and teaching Shakespeare, as the various learning domains that need to be addressed require different strategies, content, and types of delivery. The problems we have faced during the planning and implementation of this unit's teaching and learning strategies have helped us to identify some common problems across all of our teaching practices. These questions will continue to be addressed as we go forward in planning for future iterations.

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