Article

THE PERFECT BLEND: BUILDING ACADEMIC CAPABILITY IN TECHNOLOGY-ENHANCED LEARNING PRACTICE THROUGH THE USE OF A BLENDED COURSE TEMPLATE

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INTRODUCTION

The Higher Education Academy (2018) defines technology-enhanced learning as "using technology to maximise the student learning experience."

While the concept of a blended course template for technology-enhanced learning is not a new one, prior to 2015, at Otago Polytechnic we were not using one. Nor were we offering to build capability within our academic staff to provide them with the skills to develop their courses in a consistent, functional and aesthetically pleasing way, in order to ensure the best experience for our learners.

Until now.

BACKGROUND

In 2015, Otago Polytechnic implemented a blended course template for use within the Designing for Learner Success (D4LS) project. The D4LS project focused on the "redesign and redevelopment of all vocational and degree programmes to improve learner success" (Goode, Hegarty, & Levy, 2018, p. 392) in order to ensure that:

- courses were effectively and efficiently developed (approximately 400 courses (Otago Polytechnic, 2017) were developed over three years)
- consistency was achieved within programmes
- minimum quality requirements were met.

Note: At Otago Polytechnic, *programmes* are complete study pathways leading to a qualification, comprising individual *courses*.

If we fast-forward to 2018, the D4LS project is now transitioning to business as usual. We are starting to roll out our blended course template to those who have not been through the D4LS process and who are ready and willing (initially) to implement the template into their programme. We will then endeavour to ensure that all our blended programmes are using the blended course template over the next couple of years.

WHY USE A TEMPLATE?

We needed to create a template to help facilitate technology-enhanced learning within our blended courses. It is important to note that the template is not required for compliance measures, but is rather a recommended structure that academic staff can use to develop quality learning experiences.

Figure 1. Three advantages of using a blended course template. Adapted from Sahu (2014).

According to Kimberly Smith (lecturer, School of Midwifery, Otago Polytechnic):

> The blended course template will be very good for students, as it provides consistency across courses/programmes so that wherever students go they know where to find information related to particular aspects of their courses (e.g., module information, tutorial information, assessment information). This will eliminate issues with individual variability of Moodle courses that can confuse students about where they can find the relevant information for different aspects of their courses.

Three major advantages of using a blended course template include improved *consistency*, *efficiency* and *quality*.

CONSISTENCY

Structure: By incorporating the same components within each course in a programme, our learners can quickly pick up on the course's "rhythms and patterns and have a better idea of what to expect than if the course were designed using a varying structure" (Kelly, 2018).

Feedback from our learners shows that they often do not know what is required of them, and can easily get lost within their online course. If a course has a consistent format that is easy to follow, then in subsequent topics and modules learners will become increasingly familiar and comfortable with their online learning environment. Many programmes offer a variety of courses, all with different academic teaching staff, which often results in a huge variance in learner experience. Using a common template will help to ensure consistency across the programme, as long as we support academic staff and ensure that they are engaged in the redesign and redevelopment process.

> The template has more clarity and it is easier to locate information for the learner. The design allows for easy access to information on modules, assessments and course content. I think the greatest benefit is that the designs are all very similar in presentation, which enables the learners to have consistency of information under each of the specific tabs.
>
> Narinder Verma, senior lecturer, Bachelor of Occupational Therapy, Te Ohu Ora, Otago Polytechnic.

Navigation: Learners become familiar with the icons, tabs, menus and other important online navigation elements. "This prevents online learner frustration and makes the process simple and stress-free" (Pappas, 2018). This then allows the learner to focus on the course subject matter, rather than spending time trying to find what they are looking for. We regularly receive feedback that learners cannot find what they need. If a learner's needs and preferences are met, then this ideally "increases the level of engagement of your online learners and allows them to connect on a deeper level" (Pappas, 2018).

EFFICIENCY

Reduced time and development costs: While developing a course for the first time will require substantial resources, it will significantly lessen each time the course is delivered, as academic staff will have the opportunity to review and improve the course iteratively.

Rapid course creation: We can back up and restore the blended course template into a new course instance very quickly. Placeholders for minimum requirements are readily available and the user can start populating the template with course-specific information immediately. This means that academic staff have more time to focus on developing engaging and interactive learning activities and focusing on what they, personally, bring to the learning experience, through delivering their knowledge and expertise in the classroom. Once the structure of the first module (for example) is developed, the user can duplicate this for use in the next module, to ensure consistency throughout the course.

Simplified course updates: Before the delivery of the next occurrence of a course, the dates within the course schedule will need to be revised and there is an opportunity to refresh the content to ensure that it is current, relevant and engaging. In this way, at the end of each year/semester, academic staff can focus on improving their activities, rather than reinventing the wheel in regards to content and meeting the minimum requirements.

QUALITY

Professionalism: Quality blended learning will enhance our brand image and identity.

Accessibility: The template is designed for accessibility and includes a tool that learners can use to choose how they access the content – for example, through reading, listening, editing text appearance or highlighting text.

Responsive design: Learners can access their course materials on a range of devices, thereby allowing academic staff and learners to focus on the content itself rather than on the way in which the device presents the content.

James Sunderland and Alexa Andrew, senior lecturers in the Bachelor of Occupational Therapy, Te Ohu Ora, Otago Polytechnic, share their feedback after delivering their new course for the first time:

> *We are really positive about the presentation of the template, that presents a professional, attractive and engaging face for our course (Foundations of Occupational Therapy). We really appreciate how content is condensed and well signposted for students and staff alike. The structure has been easy to explain and reinforce with students. This has not always been the case with previous Moodle layouts. Student feedback shows that our students have engaged with and appreciate multiple aspects of the Moodle shell for this course, in particular the quizzes, exam banks, readings questions and multimedia content. We really appreciated the level of consultation with [Learning and Teaching Development]. We felt this was a true partnership, and we had both control and access to your expert advice to guide the structure and content. Awesome.*

FINDING THE RIGHT BLEND

How did we create the template, and how can we ensure that our academic staff are confident to use it?

Gather minimum requirements

Based on informal user feedback from academic staff in 2015, and keeping best practices in mind, we decided on a simple structure which would meet our minimum requirements. 'Must have' elements include:

- Course name and level (on the New Zealand Qualifications Framework)
- Welcome and course introduction from the course facilitator
- Course outline (all there is to know about the course)
- An overview of the required assessments (assessment type and weighting)
- Contact details of facilitator(s)

Alongside these minimum requirements, we strongly encourage academic staff to add further elements to their online courses, including:

- Assessment details and online submission functionality
- Module and topic names
- Some basic online learning activities such as asynchronous discussions, formative feedback quizzes and embedded videos with questions to consider.

Our objective is to ensure that all of Otago Polytechnic's blended courses include all of the aforementioned elements, together with features that reflect Otago Polytechnic's learning and teaching strategies and recognised effective practices. These include:

- Engaging, interactive learning activities
- Experiential learning opportunities
- Problem-based activities

Create a simple structure

Our blended course template includes the following structure:

- Haere mai (welcome and introduction, course outline and schedule)
- Assessments
- Modules (broken down into topics and learning activities)
- Resources (course-wide resources, if required)
- Facilitator notes (a place for teaching staff to share lesson plans, suggestions for improvements, and so on. This section is hidden from students)

Build and test blended course template

Throughout the D4LS project, a developer from the Learning and Teaching Development team would build a course using the blended course template, based on information provided from a 'blueprint' (an output from the design phase of the project). This was a good opportunity for our developers to pilot the template and improve it iteratively, based on user feedback from both academic staff and students.
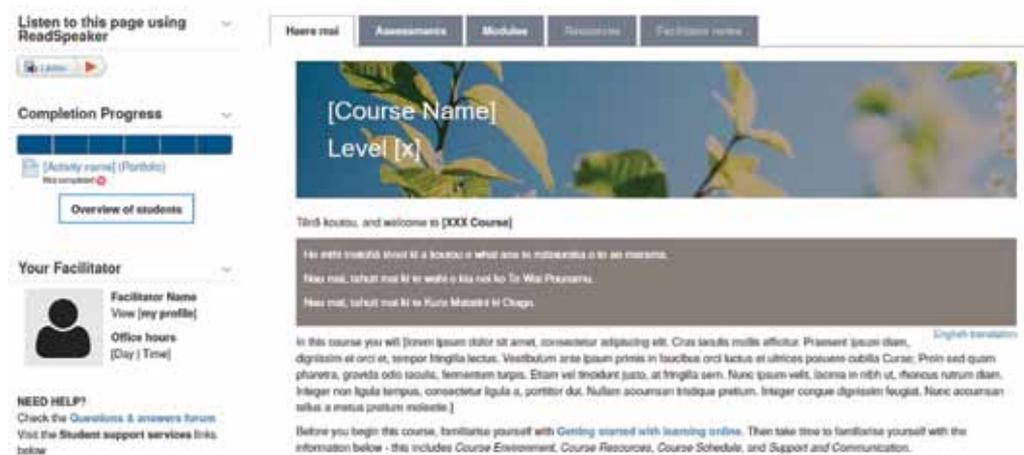

Figure 2. Screenshot of Otago Polytechnic's blended course template.

Build capability

In 2018, as we start to roll out the template to other existing programmes (which will span across approximately two years), the Learning and Teaching Development team are beginning to work closely with programme staff to ensure that they know how to use the template. The Learning and Teaching Development team have also developed a suite of Moodle training modules. These include:

- Orientation and Assisting Students
- Copyright and Open Education Resources
- Course Administration Basics
- Resources, Learning and Assessment Activities
- *Moodle Templates
- Before Delivery
- During Delivery
- After Delivery
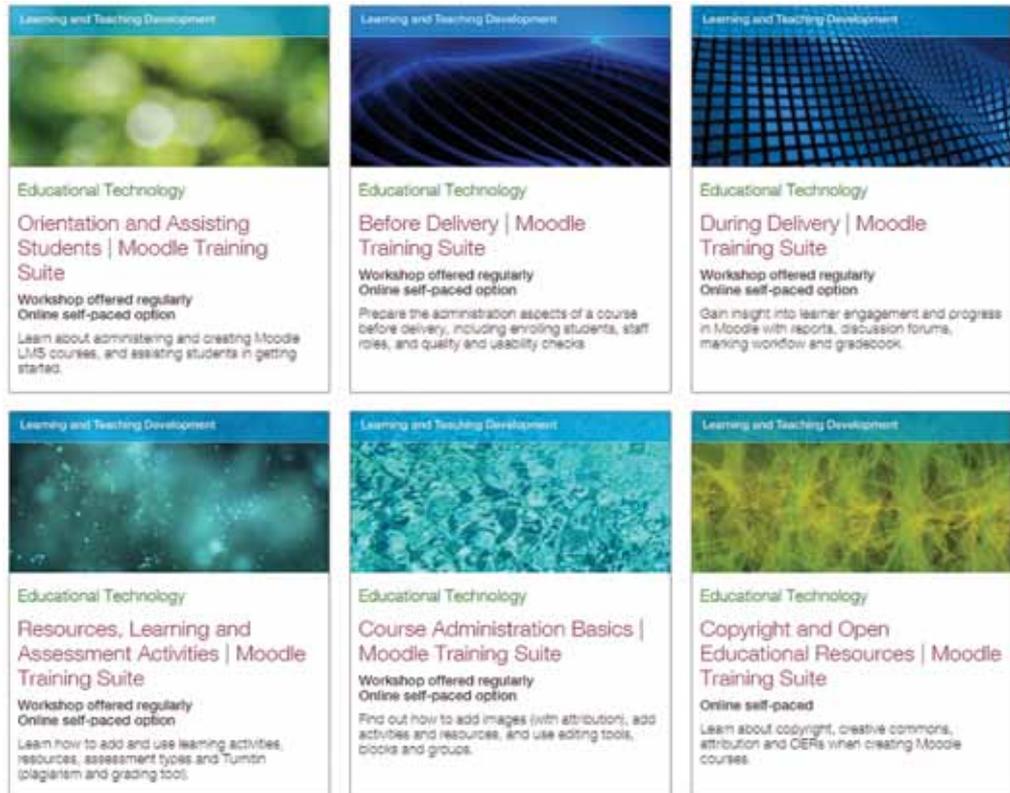
Figure 3. Screenshot of the Moodle Training Suite modules
(available on the Learning and Teaching Development team's intranet site).

These training modules have three delivery options to choose from:

- Self-paced (online, in your own time)
- Face-to-face (facilitated, focused sessions on campus)
- Distance (facilitated online, available on request)

*The Moodle Templates module includes instructions on how to use the blended course template and explains why we have included many of the components. In particular, the module includes those components that are acknowledged as minimum requirements and the rationale behind this, in terms of the user experience.

NEXT STEPS

The blended course template is available, alongside some dedicated training and support. We will work with more programme teams to ensure that their courses have a consistent design and that together we can create quality learning experiences for our learners.

We will seek feedback and suggestions for improvement of our blended course template, via online surveys and focus groups with academic staff and students. Ultimately, we want to provide the best possible online learning experience, and we need our users to share their current practices so we can seek ways to improve them.

Watch this space.

Since obtaining her degree in information communication technologies in 2004, **Rachel Cash** has worked in a variety of online development roles for the Tertiary Accord of New Zealand (TANZ) and Otago Polytechnic. She is now a learning and teaching specialist in the Learning and Teaching Development team at Otago Polytechnic.

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