

Engaging First-Year Students – A Blended Learning Model for Active Learning at Queen's University

Opportunity

In the Faculty of Arts and Science at Queen's University in Kingston, there are 2,600 first-year students. Popular courses like Psychology might have 1,600 student places and still not meet the demand. Classes have 450-700 students each. Professors, particularly in Psychology and Human Geography, were concerned about the passive experience of students who listen to three hours of lectures every week. They wanted more active learning, during which students would be discussing, applying, and integrating ideas.

A model of blended learning, integrating lecture, learning labs, and online learning, has been developed and implemented to facilitate active learning. The Human Geography course was first offered in blended format in January 2011 semester; the Psychology course, Principles of Psychology, PSYC 100 began in September 2011.

Innovation

The idea behind the conversion of these two courses has been a catalyst for a larger project to enable first-year students, who would normally be in large, lecture-based classrooms, to become more active learners. To encourage more professors to get involved, funding has been received from the Provost to develop more first-year courses with large enrolments for blended delivery – Gender Studies, Calculus, and Sociology. A popular second-year Classics course is also being re-designed.

The university system as a whole is being challenged to do things differently and has chosen to use a coordinated approach, led by Brenda Ravenscroft, Associate Dean (Studies) in the Faculty of Arts and Science.

The blended Psychology course format incorporates one face-to-face lecture a week with a learning lab facilitated by senior-year and graduate students, and online delivery of theory and background information. The students use the online information to prepare for the lectures and the labs, enabling them to participate in discussions and apply theories. The professor uses the lecture time to explore provocative questions and present case studies and research that build on the online preparation the students have done. In the learning labs, students are divided into four or five groups of six for active participation, discussion, and analysis.

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The fourth-year students who lead the learning labs are enrolled in a course in pedagogy. During these weekly classes, they complete and debrief the same exercises as they will be facilitating in the labs. This ensures a consistent approach to the learning.



Students in the PSYC100 learning lab. Photo by Justin Chin

As an example of how the course functions on a weekly basis, in one week, students are introduced to the topic of research methods through online print and video resources and activities, as well as links to further sources. During the lecture, the professor discusses his research on athletes and pain to illustrate how the principles are applied in practice. In the learning lab, students analyze and critique two research proposals in their groups of six and then collaborate in the larger group to develop a high-quality proposal. The blended model developed for the PSYC 100 course is adapted from the approach used at McMaster University which has been described in this series – *iBLM – An IntroPsych blended learning model at McMaster University*.

The other courses, which are currently being revised, will have different designs as each one uses the capacities of blended learning to best deliver the most effective structures for student learning and engagement.

Departments are given a small stipend to recognize the significant effort involved in course redesign. The funds are used to release faculty members from some of their teaching or to pay them on an overload basis. They work with instructional designers on

the design and pedagogy and also have regular group sessions to share ideas and questions. Departments whose services are integral to the project are brought in – including library services, IT services, the Centre for Teaching and Learning, and the Registrar's Office for timetabling and space allocation. The initiative is coordinated so that it has an integrated approach, built around institutional support.

To rationalize the investments in time and money, the blended courses must be used for a few years with delivery not limited to the professors who developed them. Each re-designed course goes through a complete curriculum review process to ensure there is academic and departmental support.

Outcomes and Benefits

For students, blended learning offers a learner-focused approach with more engagement and peer interaction, as well as self-paced learning using the online resources. Work is underway to make the online modules more interactive. As most first-year students enrol in at least one of these courses, they develop new capacities for learning with technology, a necessary skill for lifelong learning.

More students are able to take high-demand courses as enrolment is no longer restricted by the size of the classrooms. In the PSYC 100 course, enrolment has increased by 200 students to 1,800. As an added advantage for first-year students in a large institution, the small groups in the learning labs provide new students with a peer group and connections for both academic and social life. The lab facilitators are aware of who is missing classes – and they or the professor can approach students who may be struggling and let them know about the support services available on campus.

The labs also teach far more than the course content; students develop skills in communication, team building, collaborative problem solving, higher order thinking, and linking theory to real-world applications.

Faculty members are encouraged to think more creatively about teaching and learning, pedagogy and learner involvement. They no longer have to deliver the basic theory in lectures; instead they can expand on topics by including more research and real-life experiences.

Through this initiative, the Faculty of Arts and Science benefits by providing enhanced learning for first-year students and opening up the conversation about student learning and ways of teaching.

The university as a whole benefits from a systematic focus on transforming the learning experience of students in large enrolment classes. Queen's can offer first-year students an effective and dynamic learning experience in these blended classes.

Challenges and Enhancements

The use of the blended format changes the roles of all those involved – students, faculty, and the university.

Students must become active learners, with the responsibility for completing the online components before class and participating in the learning lab discussions and assignments. With more classes available in this format, this active role will become the norm.

Faculty who structure a course for blended delivery must re-consider fundamental issues concerning what they teach, how they teach and assess learning, and how students are best inspired to learn. Learning objectives, activities, assignments, and ways of conveying content are all modified to respond to a new pedagogy.

At the institutional level, a financial investment is required for course re-design and more facilitators for the learning labs. This expenditure is partially offset as the number of faculty affiliated with the PSYC 100 course has been reduced from six to four, allowing two professors teach other courses. However, for the institution, the motivation for adoption of blended delivery is not saving costs but the enhancement of learning.

Queen's lacks good space for active learning which requires large, flat surfaces with mobile tables and chairs. Some flat classroom spaces may be amalgamated to allow for use as learning labs and, in the longer term, a potential new teaching and learning centre, may provide more usable space.

Potential

Queen's is also working to expand its online offerings to better serve distance learners and offer options to on-campus students. The goal is not the replacement of in-class courses but greater access and flexibility. Blended and online courses may be offered at the same time, using the same high-quality online materials for both. A future call for proposals will support the simultaneous development of both blended and online formats.

The effectiveness of the blended courses will be measured against traditional courses in terms of student engagement and learning and the results will be published.

Dr. Ravenscroft is already engaged in discussions with, and presentations to, colleagues in other post-secondary institutions in Ontario and beyond and would be interested in wider discussions about challenges and solutions. Topics of particular interest are conveying the idea that this initiative is about student learning, not cost, and supporting faculty throughout the process of change and re-design.

For Further Information

Brenda Ravenscroft
Associate Dean (Studies)
Faculty of Arts and Science
Queen's University
ravenscr@queensu.ca