

Case Study

Building Blocks for Pedagogic Innovation

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Introduction

Recognising the impact of the pandemic on the already complex lives of our students, the University of Suffolk searched for a more flexible and accessible approach to learning and teaching. The outcome, a compassionate Block and Blend pedagogy enhances student experience, retention and success while reigniting conversations about curriculum design.

What we were trying to solve?

Why did the project start?

We wanted to find a way of doing what we do – better. How could we better support students to stay in learning? How could we support them to succeed, achieve aspirations, develop into confident, knowledgeable and empowered graduates? How could we have greater impact on those students who typically experienced more barriers to success in higher education?

We wanted to take a holistic, student-centred approach which acknowledged the complex lives of students studying at the University of Suffolk. We recognised that for many the challenges they faced would only become worse during the pandemic – and would likely continue to be so afterwards.

What were the project aims or objectives?

To develop a compassionate approach to the design and delivery of learning, teaching and assessment which would:

- Capitalise on enhancements to delivery provided through enhanced digital estate and learning technology infrastructure (in direct response to the pandemic)
- Increase student success and achievement through increased sense of efficacy and confidence as learner
- Increase retention and reduce requests for extenuating circumstances

Increase engagement with learning, and the experience of learning for those who are more likely to experience barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education.

Project implementation or approach

Our project has had three phases; Pilot, Roll-out, covered below and the ongoing enhancement, described in “next steps”. Each has been underpinned by an evaluation strategy to understand the impact on stakeholders across the university community.

The project was led by me in collaboration with the Associate Deans for Learning, Teaching and Student Experience for each of the academic Schools. It reported directly to University Senate.

Pilot May 2020 – January 2021

The pilot was focussed on a first year undergraduate courses which did not include embedded placement. The pilot model was designed following a review empirical literature (e.g., McCluskey et al., 2019). After approval of the pilot and evaluation framework by Senate, work began with Course teams and Quality Assurance to ensure required processes were flexible and supported a pilot whilst maintain required rigour.

Course teams were supported in the design work through the publication of a blueprint (University of Suffolk, 2023) for designing in block, which has now been through several iterations, and a specially designed blended learning module on effective use of learning technology, and the online learning environment (University of Suffolk, 2020). This module was mandatory for all staff teaching in the Covid-context.

Staff and student buy in was critical. Senior leaders spoke with the Student Union elected representatives and attended School meetings to explain – and do the sell. Why were we trying this? What was the evidence base?

Roll out February 2021 - date

Following evaluation of data and experience at the end of the first blocks, and the publication of the evaluation report internally (Buck et al., 2021), a wider roll out – and pilot was developed for academic year 2022/23. Schools took a mixed approach to this, with some including their whole provision, others joining with their first year cohorts for the first time. At this point variations in block models began to develop – recognising differences in subject areas – and the need for co-delivery of modules bringing together theory and practice.

Evaluation focussed on the impact of the new approach on students who typically experienced more barriers to success and achievement in HE. Continuation was a primary focus – looking particularly at groups identified in our Access and Participation target groups; those from low participation neighbourhoods, and those with declared mental health conditions.

With the exception of apprenticeship programmes, all undergraduate provision was on block from academic year 2023/24.

What outcomes or changes did the project achieve?

Positive outcomes have been realised in relation to continuation, experience and engagement. This appears to be particularly true for students from low participation neighbourhoods, where continuation rates for block were 94% versus 81% on semesterised, and 94% versus 76% for students with declared mental health conditions.

Where course teams had worked to intentionally design for the block and blend pedagogy, students largely recognised the ability to focus on particular topics and deep dive, *“block teaching has allowed me to research the module at depth and given me time to reflect. It enabled me to write arguments in a way that stretches my world view”*, felt a greater sense of control, *“helped provide my life with some predictability”* – and enjoyed being able to see progress in and through learning from early on in their course; *“There is a sense of being organised and ‘ticking off’ modules - personally, I like that, and I feel going through a module one by one makes me feel more on top of things and accomplished.”*

In the wake of the Covid pandemic, many students had ‘disappeared’ and as happened in many institutions across the sector, discourse focussed on students not wanting to engage with online, not liking online and being disaffected as a result of the pandemic. However, it became clear that disengagement was a result of digital poverty, and access to resources. The university developed a new digital technology support fund for students and adopted learning session capture policies for all lectures as default. Students had told us that *“recorded lectures give me more time to process learning”*, with the ongoing evolution of the estate having immense impact on those with disabilities and learning differences

“I just... wow. Honestly, I was blown away. It was so overwhelming I cried. Just to see it all there and press play and understand it all right away was just amazing. It's in time, it's correct, it's static, it's customisable, you can see everything you need to in once place – incredible. It's going to make a huge difference to me and to other students that need captions as well. The additional features are beyond my wildest dreams; I just wanted captions, but this has so many excellent features that I'm sure will be utilised by many others, disabled or not.”

For course teams, the experience of implementation and roll out was mixed; the initial pilot was in the midst of the Covid pandemic, the move to online had been difficult, and not everyone had the opportunity to invest as much time in intentional redesign as others. This has however, enabled us to see the differences in impact where intentional design was conducted – on experience, engagement and ongoing access of learning materials in the OLE.

Among our teams, there is, acknowledgement that:

“If the scheme of work was properly designed, so those three modules kind of linked to each other, they can see them being, you know, being kind of the common story, but if you chop it in, we are going to do this, I'm going to do this, I'm going to do that. It is difficult for them to integrate the whole thing. So, it just requires a totally rethinking of the of the content and pedagogy around it. And that requires, you know, requires people changing their styles, people changing their ways of teaching...”

This speaks to a range of staff concerns, for example, that students would focus more on assessment, would only surface learn, and that the teaching and learning of subjects would create silos of knowledge rather than a joined up curriculum. would only surface learn, and that the teaching and learning of subjects would create silos of knowledge rather than a joined up curriculum.

Key outputs

University of Suffolk. (2020) *Brightspace guidance and development resources: Digipaths* [Online].
Buck, E., Tyrell, K. & Dogaru, C. (2021) *Block and Blend Teaching: an evaluation of the University of Suffolk pilot of block and blended approaches to learning and teaching* [Online]. Suffolk: University of Suffolk. Available: https://libguides.uos.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=34464509 [Accessed 22nd September 2021].

Buck, E., Vieira Braga, P. & Ortiz Granero, C. M. (2023) 'Effective assessment in a block pedagogy: understanding the impact of summative assessment type on student achievement.' *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching*, 1, 6-16.

McCluskey, T., Weldon, J. & Smallridge, A. (2019) Rebuilding the first year experience, one block at a time. *Periodical 'Rebuilding the first year experience, one block at a time'* [Online], 10. Available: <http://uos.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.uos.idm.oclc.org/docview/2200496853?accountid=17074> [Accessed 21st May 2020].

University of Suffolk. Available:

Buck, E., Tyrell, K. & Dogaru, C. (2021) *Block and Blend Teaching: an evaluation of the University of Suffolk pilot of block and blended approaches to learning and teaching* [Online]. Suffolk: University of Suffolk. Available: https://libguides.uos.ac.uk/ld.php?content_id=34464509 [Accessed 22nd September 2021].

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University of Suffolk. (2023) *Course Design Blueprint* [Online]. Available: <https://libguides.uos.ac.uk/celt/cdb/home> [Accessed 15th August 2023].

Next steps

The evolution of our pedagogy continues, with specific areas of focus in relation to assessment strategies, alternative models and the lived experience of the pedagogy for students with disabilities. A one-size fits all approach will never work – whatever the pedagogy, but a compassionate pedagogy such as this, which has surfaced opportunities to enhance the experience for all through intentional design and use of technology can have – and does have positive impact across all student and staff groups.

Our next steps particularly focus on:

Intentional design – and the embedded use of blend. In this pedagogy, the OLE and other digitally enabled learning experiences, activities and resources are not companion pieces, rather there are at the heart of the experience and the learning. Achieving this requires co-design, co-creation and time – for academics, learning designers and students to come together, and play.

Ongoing evaluation of assessment strategies and the development of our block and blend assessment philosophy. Research (Buck et al., 2023) is indicating that some assessment modes are more effective than others – and are perceived as such by students and staff.

The lived experience of block and blend – a truly compassionate pedagogy for all.

Evaluation and monitoring

Our University is committed to belief that the power of education is in the transformation of individuals and communities. Our access and participation work provides us with a vehicle to measure the impact of our bold, and innovative pedagogy on those individuals and groups of students for whom we work.

Reflections

What factors enabled or supported this work?

Honest stakeholder engagement – you can't have all the answers for a journey like this – but you can learn together and create safe spaces in which to do this.

Sharing and learning from good practice. We learned from our colleagues at Victoria University in Australia, and as the first university in the UK to roll this out for undergraduate we have shared our experiences with other UK HEIs too.

Capitalising on investment in the digital educational landscape. Skills developed in blended learning – and the advantages experienced by many became part of the standard – and improved access for many.

What obstacles or challenges did you experience/did you mitigate against?

Such a move is a huge cultural change, and there may never be a 'good time' to do work like this. We wanted to give course teams opportunities to 'play' with the pedagogy before committing themselves to course changes through whole scale redesign and reapproval – which would inevitably be needed for some. So, flexible QA processes in relation to course modifications were needed.

Champions and evidence are critical. And the push back may not just be academic. Block teaching is often perceived as being negative for those with disabilities or mental health conditions, but this is not always the case as our data is indicating.

Block and intensive modes are gaining traction globally, and there are many models and experiences to consider and learn from.

With thanks to the staff and students of the University of Suffolk who have worked with and for our pedagogy to realise the opportunities this pedagogy provides. Thanks also to the global block practitioner community, especially Victoria University, Melbourne, for sharing and supporting our work.



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