OUR NEW BLENDED NORM: A STUDENT & STAFF DIALOGUE REFLECTING ON THE COVID-19 TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS IN TERTIARY EDUCATION.

Yury Zhukov and Christiaan Brendenkamp

ABSTRACT

Experiential learning has become a cornerstone of the teaching methodology used at Otago Polytechnic Auckland International Campus (OPAIC). The value of this model lies in its unique culture that relies on the lecturer-student interaction. It focuses on cultivating experiences as a primary education delivery mechanism instead of relying on teacher-centric techniques. Under normal circumstances, this makes for a great learning experience as students have to learn by doing and interacting directly with the subject matter. Things changed when New Zealand went under lockdown for the first time in March 2020. The staff and students at OPAIC quickly switched to a fully online and, later, blended model where teaching could move seamlessly between the classroom and online as and when needed.

The paper explores the perspective of a newly enrolled student on the effectiveness of experiential learning in a blended environment. It presents a reflective dialogue between the authors on communication challenges imposed by lockdowns and engaging with educational materials. This reflection emerging through a conversation highlights the potentially problematic aspects of the student induction in the educational process and recommends areas that require further attention and strengthening to achieve the results promised by experiential learning in the new normal. The student perspective is supplemented by the lecturer's view on how OPAIC could address some of the highlighted challenges along with future possibilities for authentic partnership between students and lecturers to improve the students' experience in the Tertiary environment.

Keywords: COVID-19; Hybrid learning; Experiential learning; Student reflection

The paper is a conversation between the two authors. Words of the lecturer are in italics and the student's responses are in regular font. All statements present a personal perspective of the authors and are intended to encourage an open dialogue and partnership between educators and students to cocreate a more effective tertiary experience. The authors believe that an open dialogue is necessary and particularly critical in times of crises predicated on a myriad of factors, all of which have been exacerbated and pulled into shrper focus by COVID-19 and the global changes perpetuated by it. It is the authors' hope that allowing authentic voices to be heard in decision-making processes at all levels can result in a genuine amelioration of conditions for those most affected by the changes.

"You joined OPAIC as a student in late 2020. You avoided the first lockdowns that New Zealand experienced and did not have to go through the traumatic and turbulent transition to emergency online classes (Zhukov & Staples, 2020). You joined OPAIC once it had already had time to develop unified approaches to online studies and course design techniques that would allow for instant switches. We have probably taken a step back from the level of preparedness that we had in the middle of 2020 after the first

lockdown. It feels that some of the practices that became routine during online classes are being reverted, and this may negatively affect our ability to deliver blended learning. One thing that I know has been brought back to the pre-lockdown scenario is orientation. Could you tell me a little bit about your experience with an orientation at OPAIC?"

ORIENTATION EXPERIENCE

"Starting my studies at OPAIC presented unique challenges for me and my classmates, lecturers, and the rest of the staff on campus. The first day of orientation already set the tone for how OPAIC dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. By the time I arrived on campus New Zealand had already experienced its first few lockdowns and the staff at OPAIC had already gone through the worst of it.

The orientation started with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) introducing himself, taking a seat in front of us, and inviting us to join an informal, honest discussion of our current situation. This was a new experience for me and one that made me feel at ease. The CEO's humble demeanour communicated to me that as students we were being included in the overall discussion on the happenings around campus. This was a discussion and not a monologue."

"Do you think orientation helped prepare you for the realities of your studies? In hindsight, what would you want to see introduced during orientation rather than learning it by trial and error?"

"The orientation did not prepare the students to do research, reference, or deliver proper academic writing. At OPAIC it was very different from what I had experienced in previous academic settings. It seemed rushed, with a lot of information being crammed into a few sessions held on a single day. This fast pacing does not provide adequate breathing room for newcomers to get accustomed to their alien surroundings.

Prior academic orientations that I had experienced were a multi-week affair with each day focusing on a single aspect of the studies and student life. One day we would go to the Information Technology (IT) department to get our login sorted, devices connected to the campus Wi-Fi, and have a chance to ask any IT-related questions we might have. The next day we would go to get our student cards sorted out. The Student Success Team provided us with a recommended schedule for when to get things done, but it could still be done out of order and in our own time.

The most beneficial part of my prior orientations that I think OPAIC can learn from is how to handle study skills. At my previous institution, all students were required to complete a test that would evaluate certain study skills. The context as to what was tested and why would be different for OPAIC. I have seen and heard that students primarily struggle with English writing, referencing, and conducting research using peer-reviewed sources. I think it would be in OPAIC's best interests to have students undertake a test to evaluate their competency in these areas during orientation. If the students score below a certain level, they should be enrolled in a compulsory course. The academic support services on campus would then be responsible for providing that course. This way they would get acquainted with the staff there, and it would normalise the idea of going there for academic support."

"I agree that orientation is very brief. We try to cram a bit of academic information into the orientation, but I am not sure how much is retained. But we used to have academic workshops happening throughout the term until 2021. The turnout was insufficient to keep them going. I wonder if making the study-skills courses a compulsory part of the orientation could be a more effective solution. It would make at least some of the students better prepared for the classes (Qayyum, 2018). And speaking of classes, could you please share your impressions of them?"

CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

"OPAIC's classroom experience was similar to the orientation I went through. I would argue that we did not have lecturers, because "lecturer" would not be the right term, as they did not lecture us. We had open

discussions directed by the lecturer. It was my first time being taught with the experiential learning model."

"I prefer the term "educator" or "facilitator".

"Before I came to New Zealand I was working as a lecturer at a university in South Africa. I was unfamiliar with experiential learning, but from my teaching, I had always made it my goal to include students in the discussion as much as possible. I was glad to see that OPAIC's teaching methods had the same aim.

I found experiential learning to be a wonderful tool for student engagement. A challenge that I noticed the lecturers had was getting the students out of their comfort zones and participating in the classroom setting. This might have been due to differing cultural norms and expectations. I think compulsory teamwork built into most of the courses helped bridge that gap. This helped the more introverted students and those who did not feel comfortable participating in a general class discussion to start opening up and participating in the activities.

The experience I had in my very first class at OPAIC was not what I was expecting. It went against the status quo that I had become accustomed to. I was pleasantly surprised as it had been the same learning environment that I strived to create within my classroom when I was teaching. A loosely structured environment where students are encouraged to provide ideas and share experiences as part of the learning journey was a joy to behold.

I am not the right person to ask about comfort zones because to me comfort zones are the furthest thing from actual comfort. It makes me think of predictably endless monotony. It is, however, a challenge for teachers to overcome in the classroom. Getting students to engage is not easy and in my experience, it becomes harder and harder as the classroom size increases. Having a small intimate setting where students don't have to raise their voice just to be heard lowers the barrier for them to participate in the lesson.

There is one thing that I think makes it harder for students to engage – the perception of expected vs. voluntary participation. If students are told from the start that they are required to participate in class discussion, they seem to rebel against that. Nobody wants to be told what they need to do. This is fine for presentations but not the classroom in general. Passionate voluntary participation can only blossom in an environment that encourages students to share their interests. Passion begets passion. If lecturers can find ways to link a student's interest to what is being discussed in class then they will have a higher chance of having more student participation overall."

"There is an expectation embedded in the educational process that both students and teachers participate in it (Kim et al., 2019). I am not sure that rebellion against a requirement for class participation is appropriate in a tertiary setting. But I understand what you are saying. There could be an unconscious bias against engaging with materials that seem disconnected from one's reality. Giving students agency in selecting their topics is a non-transient tribulation (Nugent et al., 2018; Wei, 2018). How did you cope with online and blended classes?"

MIXED CLASSROOM EXPERIENCE

"Experiential learning, group exercises & challenges were all wonderful ways of helping students put theory into practice. I would say that the biggest obstacle to the success of these teaching methods is hybrid and online classes. At OP AIC I had experienced both online-only classes due to lockdowns and hybrid classes with some of my classmates being stuck overseas.

The online classes I attended during lockdowns varied from class to class. Some were long monologues from teachers, a big departure from what I had experienced on campus. Others were short monologue classes of about one hour or less followed by an assignment we had to complete in our own time. Some of the lecturers did try to get students to engage online, but most were hesitant to join in. Many of the students did not want to turn on their cameras or even use their microphones. Some of the students only

felt comfortable communicating through the class chat system.

I did my best to participate and ask questions in the online classes. I could see the frustration the lecturers experienced in their mostly failed attempts to get student participation. Having class strictly online was new and unfamiliar territory for both the lecturers and the students. Every student I talked with said they prefer class on campus and that they would not have studied at OPAIC if it had been online only."

"Did the education methodology shift significantly when you had to go online (Dai et al., 2020)? Having seen the system from the perspective of a student, how would you recommend getting students more engaged online? Did you feel that the experiential approach could have been facilitated in the online environment?"

"The education methodology did indeed experience a dramatic shift when classes went online. I would say that experiential learning in the traditional sense does not translate well into the online environment. The learning environment itself goes through a significant shift, from the classroom to the home. I have heard from both students and lecturers that when at home students tend to "multi-task" between classroom activities and actions they would only perform from the comfort and privacy of their homes. This leads to distraction and disinterest, making it harder for the lecturers to compete for attention and almost impossible to cultivate student participation. Having more challenges and short projects is one method that could potentially offer a successful recasting of experiential learning to online learning (Wang et al., 2013). This helps students focus on the task at hand making them less likely to busy themselves with other things (Wang et al., 2013).

The question one might have after reading this is will it work with group projects? In my experience, the answer is no. I have taken part in an online collaborative assignment, working with two of my classmates. One was in Hamilton and the other in mainland China. Even though we had teams open and collaborated in real-time on the same document we all tended to work in isolation. Nobody used the VOIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol) system, only offering text updates on their work now and then. The real-time document collaboration itself was more of a gimmick than anything else. All of us started working on our separate documents whilst neglecting the main document. This experience showed me that if experiential learning was to succeed online it would have to do so through individual works shared with the group. Using VOIP systems can lead to people talking over each other or feeling like they are speaking into a cold and heartless void. Having lecturers provide short monologues of teaching followed by time-sensitive projects and presentations by students seems like the future of online experiential learning. This way students don't get distracted, the messaging is clear and they still get to learn and share through experiences."

"Project-based learning is one of the cornerstones of experiential learning (Altay et al., 2016; Geitz et al., 2019). It makes sense to have small and manageable milestones that would lead students through the overarching course project. From what I have seen, this works reasonably well in some online courses, but it also helps transition between online, blended, and face-to-face models rather easily. The level of engagement probably also depends on how comfortable a student feels in a team. Please, carry on."

UNIQUE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT CHALLENGES

"As previously mentioned the blended class situation is a hard one to deal with, especially in group work. I have had offshore group members in two of my classes and had experienced similar problems in both instances. Some of these challenges are unique to international students as it adds language and cultural differences into the mix. What I have found is our group functioned better when one of the group members in the class had a similar cultural and linguistic background to that of the offshore group member. It helped them feel more at ease knowing that there was a team member oncampus who would be able to understand and easily relate to them."

"As a member of the student team, did you feel that the students online were either left out or did not engage with activities? How would you change the activities to better work for both physical and digital classrooms?"

"That is an interesting question with an unfortunately disappointing answer. When students work together in close proximity they feel a stronger urge to do their part for the team. It becomes a lot easier to disengage as the physical distance between team members grows. Another challenge I found was that solely online students sometimes lack the correct context to participate properly. They might have a difficult time hearing or understanding the lecturer due to low internet bandwidth or have language-related challenges.

Whatever the cause may be it leaves team members who are in class in a difficult position. I want to include them in what the group is doing but I also do not want to provide proper context to hijack the entire group work session. What usually happens is that the online student provides a contribution that is of little to no value to the project, but I thank them for their efforts and move forward with the work. If I do find value in their contribution then I include it in the project. This whole ordeal is a frustrating experience for everyone involved.

It is hard for me to draw from my previous teaching background to solve this problem as I had never experienced a situation like this before. What I do think would make students feel more comfortable and provide them with the proper context and understanding is to have a student with a similar cultural background in the group. What I did in one group to help bridge the language and knowledge gap was to ask an team member on campus to have a separate session with the online student. This way they would have more than enough time to provide a proper context and answer any questions the online student might have in their native tongue. This solution freed up time in the class sessions to focus on the group work while also being able to support the online student and make them feel included in the project."

"It seems that to successfully work together online students need to be able to work almost autonomously (Dabbagh & Fake, 2017). This seems to be leading back to course design. And in this case, I think educators could borrow the know-how from project management. If the lecturers from the very beginning, knowing the constraints of online courses, do not position themselves as the locus of class activities, but act as project managers supplying detailed tasks to teams and individual team members with specific allocated deliverables and integration criteria, the result could be different. Classes could be more like standup meetings, and sprint-planning sessions rolled into one. Do you think this is a concept we could explore further?"

RECOMMENDATIONS

"Yes, this new normal that tertiary institutions find themselves in necessitates a critical reflection of course outlines. The way courses function should improve the student experience. This has become more challenging with the new blended class standard that the OPAIC now has. Project management (PM) as a means of facilitating learning is an interesting idea. At OPAIC this might prove beneficial as PM will be part of the workplace most students should end up at after their studies. Construction, IT, and Applied Management students already learn about PM concepts as part of their studies.

Using the PM methodology in learning could prove useful. Each course could be treated as a project, with students split up into teams and with each team member being responsible for a specific deliverable. Even if students are in a team, having individually tracked deliverables for each student can help cut down on friction in blended classes. Each student would then have to receive unique work packages that they would be responsible for and would be marked against. Another benefit of this delivery structure would be an easier and less disruptive move between physical and online-only classes. If classes are treated more like stand-up meetings then it would require monologues from both the lecturer and students. The lecturer will have to go over the requirements, remind students of assignment deadlines and provide clarification on the students' work packages. Students will have to provide updates on their work and go over the

challenges they might be facing. This would open a possibility for collaboration where other students, or the lecturer, can step in and provide potential solutions that might help that student. This whole structure would aid in the simulation of a real-world working environment and help students get accustomed to the working conditions they will be facing after graduation."

CONCLUSION

"OPAIC's usage of experiential learning requires constant lecturer-student interaction for it to be beneficial to the student learning experience. Cultivating experiences as a means of delivering education is hard when the learning environment is constantly changing. It seems that institutions have relied on a stable and predictable learning environment, which has become a luxury in a COVID and Post-COVID world.

As a new student, it has been an interesting experience to have gone through, and as a lecturer, it has been very educational. There are a few problematic aspects to theorientation process that I have noticed. The orientation process itself is concise but does not provide all of the support that I think is needed for students new to tertiary environment. Academic workshops have been offered as a substitute but OPAIC should do more to aid students who are just starting their studies. Having a compulsory study skills course as part of orientation, as I did at my previous university would help set up students for success.

Experiential learning on the other hand has been a joy for me to experience and a delivery model that I would recommend to other tertiary institutions that rely on traditional lectures. It does however come with its challenges that have to be overcome. Due to the world dealing with this new normal these challenges have been expanded due to the new normal brought about by COVID 19. A possible way that experiential learning-based courses can overcome these issues is to structure the course to function more like a project, with the lecturer acting more like a project manager. This is an area of interest for future research that could lead to an improved learning model that can better cope with the challenges brought about by a blended learning environment."

Yury Zhukov's journey in Aotearoa started when he decided to pursue of his research interests in deliberative democracy and e-government at the University of Auckland. He has been working in tertiary education alongside other jobs for over fifteen years. Yury has a research Master's degree and is working on his PhD at the moment.

Christiaan Brendenkamp is a researcher currently employed at Otago Polytechnic AIC. From industry research and analysis for consultancy projects, he progressed to an academic career in continental philosophy specialising in psychoanalytic philosophy and philosophy of economics. His strong academic and professional background in research creates collaboration with international partners in many academic disciplines and industry sectors.

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