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# SUPPORTING THE MOVE TO POST-PANDEMIC BLENDED TEACHING: REFLECTIONS ON A PROFESSIONAL LEARNING SHORT COURSE

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## Abstract

Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic meant that universities had to reconsider ways of teaching. However, academics and students in South African higher education are still dealing with lingering challenges from the pandemic and are largely unfamiliar with good practices in blended learning and teaching. As learning and teaching support professionals working with academics in a specific faculty, our challenge was to consider how to best support academics to (re)design their courses, aligned to an institutional shift. The purpose of this case study is to critically reflect on the design and offering of a professional learning short course, within a specific faculty, to assist academics in adapting to blended teaching. The research objective is to determine how the professional learning course could support the needs of academics in moving to post-pandemic blended teaching. The paper makes use of a qualitative reflective approach, consisting of the reflections of two faculty learning and teaching support staff and evaluation data from academic staff participants. The paper argues that i) a contextualized and responsive approach to academic professional learning is required to better support academics in embedding different forms of learning and teaching; and ii) that academics require dedicated time and space for course (re)design.

## Keywords:

blended learning, academic development, micro-course, curriculum development.

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on higher education, including how learning and teaching support is provided to academics. However, prior to the pandemic, not many academics in South African universities had integrated technologies into their learning and teaching. Moving beyond the pandemic, the challenge facing learning and teaching support professionals is which professional learning approaches to adopt to best support academics in moving to blended teaching. Adopting a reflective and reflexive approach, this study considers the perspectives of two support staff in designing and offering a blended mode short course for academics in a specific faculty and the feedback from staff who have completed the course. The paper first contextualises the research, then sets out the research aim and questions. This is followed by a brief review of relevant literature and a discussion of the research design. We then provide the research findings and conclusion.

## Background and Contextualisation

The two researchers in this study work in the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management's Teaching and Learning Unit at a contact university in South Africa. The university, like many others, had to transition to Emergency Remote Learning and Teaching (ERTL) (Hodges et al., 2020) in 2020. Even before the pandemic, the University's five-year teaching strategy (2020-2024) emphasised the need for a blended learning and teaching approach, characterised by increased flexibility. This strategy also emphasises the need to enhance academics as university teachers, strengthen the institutional capacity for curriculum development and renewal, and diversify assessment methods (Wits University, 2019). Furthermore, the 2022 operational plan for this strategy called for the implementation of blended approaches as a new default mode for learning and teaching going forward (Wits University, 2021). Yet, this is an area that is still unfamiliar to many academic staff and students, with many being unaware of good practices. Therefore, professional learning approaches are required that support academics to design or redesign their courses for a blended mode.

The "Introduction to Blended Course Design" short course for academics was designed in 2021 and offered in January 2022, February 2022, March 2022 and July 2022. The facilitators aim to offer the course before the start of each semester. The course is a part-time course that consists of 30 notional study hours and takes place over three weeks. Each cohort consists of 10-20 participants, with two co-facilitators. Key resources that influenced the design of the course were from Bates (2019), Cleveland-Innes and Wilton (2018) and Joosten et al. (2021).

## Research Aim and Objective

The purpose of this case study is to critically reflect on the design and offering of a professional learning course to assist academics in adapting to blended learning and teaching. This is part of the authors' role of within faculty teaching and learning unit that offers support services to academics through short courses, webinars, workshops and consultative support around learning, teaching and assessment. The research objective is to determine how the professional learning course could support the needs of academics in moving to post-pandemic blended teaching.

## Literature Review

This section provides a review of the literature related to curriculum development in higher education, course planning for academic professional learning, and the move to blended learning and teaching. These aspects informed the design and facilitation of the short course.

### Curriculum Development and Change

Emphasising the importance of context, Cornbleth (1988) states that "[c]ontext situates and shapes curriculum; thus, changing a curriculum involves changing its context" (p. 91). Lindén et al. (2017) point out the fundamental purpose of curriculum should be to consider "what is learned and how it is learned" (p. 138). While considering the contextual transition to blended learning and teaching, the initial curriculum focus may be on the "how?" in making decisions about what it taught face-to-face and what is taught online. However, this may raise broader questions for academics about what they teach in specific courses. Bens et al. (2021) characterise the role of academic developers as supporting academics in higher education as facilitators and change agents for curriculum development. The design and offering of a blended course for academics not only requires decisions around and how to teach for the course itself, and the alignment to contextual needs, but also requires considerations of how it may affect the decisions of academics in changing their own curricula. This implies awareness of the sociocultural influences (Cornbleth, 1988) enabling and constraining academic agency.

### Academic Professional Learning

Academic developers focus on providing holistic support to academics around learning and teaching matters in a joint enterprise (Sutherland, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic had a major impact on higher education, including how those in academic professional learning (academic development) provided support to academics (Kuntz et al., 2022; Stanton & Young, 2022). Professional learning support interventions had to be available to academics in a timely and responsive virtual mode (Kuntz et al., 2022). In the researchers' institution, this mainly took the form of synchronous webinars, supplemented with resources on a faculty support course site (Krull & MacAlister, 2022) aligned to centralised support services. However, not all academics participated across the different webinars and going into depth about theories, pedagogies and technologies is constrained in a webinar format.

Stanton & Young (2022) propose that academic developers must act with care and promote self-reflection and empathy to be responsive and facilitative. Considerations need to be made about which professional learning approaches to adopt to best support academics in moving to blended teaching. Bens et al. (2021) advise on the importance of academic development being dialogic and flexible and adapting to emerging conditions, while Evans et al. (2020) promote providing appropriate support and "hands-on" modelling. Curriculum decisions have to be made around offering face-to-face, online or blended options as well as interventions of differing lengths (seminars, workshops or short courses). A course could promote deeper understanding and more opportunities for the sharing of good practices when compared to shorter forms of academic development, such as workshops and webinars. A course may also provide more opportunities for academics as participants to share good practices and insights across disciplines (Kuntz et al., 2022). However, for academics dealing with multiple

identities and pressures (Sutherland, 2018), some may not be willing to participate in a course or have the time to dedicate to a course.

### *Moving to Blended Learning and Teaching*

Alammary et al. (2014, p. 443) define a blended course as a course that "[t]houghtfully integrates different instructional methods and contains both F2F and computer-mediated components". Joosten et al. (2021) advocate for blended learning to be thoughtfully and strategically designed "to create meaningful connectedness across distance through active learning pedagogies" (p. 5) that results in "high-quality blended learning experiences for students" (p. 8). Bates (2019) argues that educational institutions can support the development of the knowledge and skills required to teach in a digital age by ensuring there is adequate training and support for academics and there is an institutional strategy that guides these approaches. Academics need to review their current courses and make curriculum decisions around choices of modes, learning and teaching strategies and assessments, as well as consider the experiences of their students. However, moving to blended teaching requires considered use of various learning technologies (CHE, 2014) and can result in academics being overwhelmed by the options and choices. Additionally, academics also need to consider the different theories of learning and different teaching methods and pedagogies (Bates, 2019; Evans et al., 2020). Previous research has shown the effectiveness of providing professional learning around becoming an online teacher in a blended mode (Evans et al., 2020).

## Research Design

A case study is suited to understanding unique programmes or offerings in specific settings to establish what happened (Yin, 2009). A case study approach was used to consider what happened (the experiences of facilitators and participants) during each offering of the course to determine whether support needs were perceived to have been met (Yin, 2009). Olsson & Roxa (2012) discuss how observations of learning and teaching, together with reflecting on these, could reveal new possibilities. This case study made use of reflective methods. Olsson & Roxa (2012) highlight Schon's different types of reflection which were used to guide the reflections in this study: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for action. Reflection-in-action takes place in the midst of teaching practice, while reflection-on-action takes place during observations and draws upon theoretical knowledge. Reflection-for-action is linked to planning pedagogical practice.

Ethical permission for the study was obtained from the University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). All data collected was treated confidentially and all information collected is securely stored, and only accessible by the researchers. Qualitative data was collected from the course designers/facilitators and participants. The two co-facilitators met to discuss their experiences of designing the course, demonstrating reflection-for-action. Participant reflections were collected via an anonymous online evaluation form while the facilitators held a reflective meeting at the end of each cohort. This demonstrated reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, with the aim of continuous improvement. Participants provided evaluations at the end of each cohort: 10 evaluations from 15 participants (Cohort 1), six evaluations from 15 participants (Cohort 2), three evaluations from 11 participants (Cohort 3) and three evaluations from nine participants (Cohort 4). The reflective data was analysed using inductive thematic analysis. Thematic analysis involves considering the perspectives and interpretations of the reflections through "sets of techniques used to analyse textual data and elucidate themes" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 100). Data was coded and grouped under potential categories or themes to enable comparisons (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

## Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the themes that emerged from the designer/facilitator reflections and the participant evaluation feedback. Five key themes emerged. The first two themes relate to the principles that affected the design and offering of the course, while the next three themes focused on the facilitation and ongoing redesign of the course.

### *Adopting a Responsive and Reflective Approach*

An important principle for the course design was to model blended teaching and course design practices to participants. A framework underpinning the unit's work with academics is an ethic of care (Noddings, 1988). Table 1

provides an overview of the structure of the course. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the initial cohorts were offered fully online, but Cohort 4 was offered in a blended mode (with weekly face-to-face synchronous sessions) to model good blended learning and teaching practices. Several participants commented on the value of changing how they could approach synchronous sessions with their students. For example, "I found the synchronous sessions the most valuable as this allowed for a more interactive space" (Participant 02-Cohort3).

Table 1:     Overview of the Course Structure

| Unit | Overview |
| --- | --- |
| Introduction to Blended Learning | (i) Different modes of delivery, (ii) Asynchronous vs synchronous learning, (iii) Benefits and challenges of blended learning, (iv) Blended teaching methods |
| Introduction to Blended Learning Models and Principles | (i) Blended learning frameworks (e.g., Community of Inquiry), (ii) Approaches to blended learning (e.g., flipped classroom), (iii) Design principles for blended learning |
| Introduction to Blended Course Design and Tools | (i) Tools for blended teaching, (ii) Supporting students, (iii) Using the ADDIE model, (iv) Design a blended course blueprint |

Another key design principle was to take a responsive approach to the needs of academics (Noddings, 1988) through discussions of their needs during the course as well as through the course evaluation survey. Based on earlier discussions with academics, the designers felt a key outcome was to ensure a common basis for terminology around "blended" and the introduction of models, principles and tools that could be utilised in the course (re)design process. The reflective component was yet another design principle. This is emphasised in how learning does not take place unless there is reflection and action taken (Gibbs, 1988). A weekly reflection activity was the final learning activity for each unit. Several participants commented on the value of this approach. For example: "It allowed one to reflect and put your thoughts down in writing. It provided for conversation and learning" (Participant 03-Cohort3).

### Adopting an Ungrading Approach

A further key principle adopted for this course was to focus on facilitators giving feedback and participants interacting with this feedback for future learning. The facilitators gave constructive feedback to the learning activities as they took place during a unit and participants could choose to redo any of the learning activities based on this feedback. A participant noted that the most useful aspect of the course was the "feedback provided on each one of my reflections. It [provided] me with good constructive feedback and some additional things to consider. I found this very useful as this is where my real learning took place" (Participant 05-Cohort1). Participants were also encouraged to share and give feedback to other participants, enabling the sharing of insights and ideas (Kuntz et al., 2022). Initially, a percentage grade and summary feedback were provided for each learning activity at the end of each unit, but from the third cohort, this was changed to competency-based learning (Bates, 2019) aligned to an ungrading approach to assessment (Stommel, 2018). This became an additional design principle that participants could look to adopt in their own teaching practices.

### Promoting Continuous Improvement

Bens et al. (2021) call for an approach that enables continuous improvement in curriculum development and review. The facilitators met after each cohort to reflect on their own and participant feedback with a view to improvements needed. This led to small changes taking place each time the course is offered, such as increasing the variety of learning activities. One key aspect was the timing of the course. While the aim was to offer the course before a semester started, this was not always possible, leading to some participants struggling with their workload or not completing the course: "It was great for me that this course took place during the semester break, yet, it is hard to balance with work demands" (Participant 01-Cohort 4). The course has a 57% average completion rate, which is an area that needs improvement.

Importantly, relevance of the context in which learning and teaching takes place needs to remain a priority. The initial design of the course made use of several YouTube videos to illustrate various blended learning and teaching theories and practices. However, the aim is to slowly replace these with local examples from the

university. Several interviews have taken place with academics about how they have adopted various blended teaching practices and these recordings have been embedded into the course.

### *Evaluating the Course Impacts*

As noted earlier, participants are invited to complete an anonymous evaluation form at the end of each cohort and this feedback is utilised to ensure that the course remains fit-for-purpose. These evaluations have generally been very positive about the course. For example, one participant noted:

> *"The course exceeded my expectations. I learned so much during this course and the way it was structured and planned out was great. I enjoyed the fact that it required engagement and for me to spend time doing self-reflections and taking part in discussions." (Participant 01-Cohort 1)*

Another participant highlighted the need for sharing these learnings to facilitate broader change: "I will hold a roundtable discussion in my [department] to discuss how we can improve utilising […] the various presences" (Participant 03-Cohort3). However, there is a need to still implement a mechanism to evaluate the longer-term impact of the course and the extent of any changes to learning and teaching practices and course (re)design approaches in the faculty. Future research could also look at the perspectives of students.

### *Future Support for Transitioning to Blended Teaching*

Any professional learning initiative must consider the multiple identities, tensions, and commitments that academics must deal with and the need for a reflective lens and caring approach (Sutherland, 2018; Stanton & Young, 2022). Feedback received from academics indicated that the time to redesign their courses is minimal given their workload responsibilities, including teaching and supervision duties, research and administrative functions. A frequent complaint by academics is that there is insufficient time available to implement some of the ideal practices discussed in the course. Therefore, a course such as this one is only one aspect of a holistic support strategy needed for academics to successfully transition to blended learning and teaching. Another mechanism being piloted in the faculty as part of such a support strategy is the use of course design retreats for academics (similar to research writing retreats), where academics spend a few days focused on making changes to their courses.

## Conclusion

Stanton and Young (2022) argue that the effectiveness of the work of academic developers is dependent on both the approaches or ways of working and the actions taken (the opportunities provided to academics). The purpose of this study was to critically reflect on the design and offering of a responsive professional learning course, within a specific faculty, to assist academics in adapting to post-pandemic blended learning and teaching. The research objective was to determine how a professional learning course could support the needs of academics in moving to blended teaching. Reflective data was collected from the course designers/facilitators and participant evaluations. The findings indicate that the course has broadly achieved the objective of supporting staff to transition to blended learning and teaching in a specific context, although longer term impacts still need to be considered. The focus of being responsive to participants' contextual needs, promoting reflection and taking an ungrading approach to assessment have supported this objective. Adopting a continuous improvement mindset means that redesign is always a focus. The conclusion is that i) a contextualized and responsive approach to academic professional learning is required to better support academics in embedding different forms of learning and teaching; and ii) that academics require time and space to dedicate to course (re)design.

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