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FIVE PRACTICES FOR HIGHLY EFFECTIVE POSTGRADUATE ONLINE COURSE DESIGN

John P Egan, University of Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand

Correspondence: John P Egan: j.egan@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract

In this paper I offer five practices for those making their first, self-directed foray into redesigning a postgraduate course for online delivery. Any of these individually will allow academic staff to create an online learning experience that works better than the COVID19 pivot: taking up all of these largely integrates many of the process elements of our course redesign short course. In lieu of any workshop or short course, bespoke support can be provided iteratively and individually.

Keywords: online learning, postgraduate, practices

As someone who has supported academic development in learning design, pedagogical praxis, and elearning for many years, the pace of change these last three years has been unprecedented. In 2020 many of the world's universities rapidly "pivoted" to remote delivery of teaching, as staff and students were required to isolate at home.

From a public health standpoint, this was the right decision: COVID19, as a novel respiratory virus, presented challenges for our immune systems (which tend to over-react to pathogens it cannot identify, leading to severe illness in many and risking death in those already vulnerable) and our health systems (in order to avoid potential inundation with severely, acutely ill patients). As our understanding of COVID19 rapidly evolved—and as more precise and effective treatments were identified, and vaccines developed and distributed—the need for remote learning has waned. In the regions of the world with high vaccination access and uptake, the combination of previously COVID19 exposure and vaccination means most persons' immune systems can now identify and effectively respond to this virus.

Not online

However, this pivot has erroneously been characterised by some as "online learning". With regards to the platforms and technologies used to deliver teaching and learning during COVID19, this is an accurate description of the *technologies* deployed in many contexts.

But within higher education—and specifically within contexts where courses and degrees have been wholly provisioned online for more than two decades, using particular and purpose learning designs, pedagogical methods and assessment practices—online learning is more relevant as a holistic description rather than a platform of delivery. Even among those of us who had previous experience designing and delivering online courses, what we did with our face-to-face courses in 2020 was still, for the most part, a switch to rapid remote delivery, since it was not feasible to create a comprehensive range of high quality digital collateral, or to redesign entire courses for online delivery in a matter of days.

Characteristics

Rapid remote delivery had several characteristics:

- Migration of existing learning design to online delivery: few or no changes are made to how a course is structured and delivered, in terms of scheduling, activity types, or timelines.
- Repurposing of educational collateral for online delivery: distribute lecture recordings from previous course iterations.
- As if: delivery of learning experiences like lectures, seminars, tutorials, laboratories, and competency-based pedagogies "as if" in person, synchronously.

- Assessment: few or no changes to assessment design, though administration of assessment was entirely digital.

As a just-in-time strategy in early 2020, remote learning was the best tack available to many. However, as the requirement to deliver online persisted into 2021 and 2022, students quickly began to expect more from us. In many instances 2021 commenced with academic staff de-emphasising extant collateral and developing more bespoke content, often multimedia in nature.

Unlearning

The pivot has also fomented a dynamic where staff with little or no exposure to purposively designed online learning—many of whom who were sceptical about online learning prior to COVID19—saw some positive elements of the pivot to remote learning. These well-intentioned colleagues endeavoured to integrate such elements into their post-COVID19 courses—and academic practice: some also expressed an interest in moving one or more of their courses permanently online. There was potential for an unintended curricular crisis: many individual course teams concurrently redesigning courses within a programme, with varying levels of expertise or support, and students receiving an inferior experience.

As an academic leader of a faculty-specific educational services unit at a large, research-intensive university, my team and I identified a need to provide staff development opportunities around course redesign. A significant aspect of this work has been facilitating an unlearning process, in particular ceasing with some of the 2020/2021 just-in-time practices.

In this paper I offer five practices for colleagues making their first, self-directed foray into redesigning a postgraduate course for online delivery. Any of these individually will allow academic staff to create an online learning experience that works better than the COVID19 pivot. Taking up all of these largely integrates many of the process elements of our extant course redesign short course. In lieu of any workshop or short course, bespoke support can be provided iteratively and individually.

Although many of these have applicability to undergraduate education, these recommendations are calibrated towards the sorts of specialist knowledge emphasised in the postgraduate space.

Read less; think, reflect and interact more

For many academic staff, teaching wholly online for the first time, the lack of any quantified “contact time” can be daunting: one does not realise how cognitively significant we view lecture or tutorial time until it is taken away from us. Unfortunately, some colleagues’ instinct is either to try delivering the existing session synchronously, or to overcompensate by providing a plethora of content—usually reading materials, but also multimedia collateral.

The synchronous option can work for relatively short (60 or fewer minutes) sessions, but screen time can be exhausting for 180 minutes (a typical length of postgraduate seminar at our university). In general, a lecture can work well: facilitating collaborative learning can be more challenging.

In terms of a surfeit of reading material, rather than compensate for the loss of contact time this increases student anxieties related to workload. Many students will surface read, selectively read, or give up on reading at all.

Instead, we recommend having a well written lesson or unit, supported with one or two key readings. The lesson should include an interactive asynchronous discussion designed to unpack or apply key concepts.

Examples: Scenario-based learning, including case-base, problem-based, and inquiry-based learning, allows students to analyse and synthesise the course materials well. If this is an approach you want to use multiple times, scenarios’ complexity and nuance can deepen over the length of the course. Academic staff posting a synthesis message at the end of each unit’s discussion gives them an opportunity highlight the key takeaways and transition to the next lesson or unit.

Assess early, particularly academic writing.

One strong predictor of academic success for postgraduate students—regardless of discipline or programme—is the ability to write a compelling, articulate, and literature-informed argument. While it often makes good sense for major written assessments to be due from the course midpoint or thereafter (in order for students to benefit from the course itself), this leaves a relatively narrow window for remediation with students whose writing deficiencies present a substantive barrier to postgraduate study success.

Having a small-yet-substantive written assessment due by the end of the second or third week obviates many of these challenges. For students whose writing is problematic, offer to meet with them to discuss how they can improve their subsequent written work. Matters of grammar, usage, syntax, style, punctuation, or other aspects of writing quality can be identified and presented to them as a task list, ideally with five or fewer items.

If a student successfully works to remediate these in their subsequent assessments, they can be guaranteed an agreed minimum grade (often a B) if they meet the other requirements of each assessment. This approach can detoxify and make manageable the amelioration process of “bad writing” from the amorphous and into the concrete.

At the end of the course you can indicate if there are other writing issues for them to work on beyond those in the initial task list. As the student now has experience with writing development as a process, they should be ready to self-regulate their own writing competency development with the next task list you have given them. Subsequently they can conduct their own self-reflection (Schön, 1983) of their writing, including collation, enumeration, amelioration—and repetition, as their writing improves.

Examples: reflective flight path (course-specific goal identification), reading response, essay or project proposal.

Leverage structured, quasi-synchronous discussion forums

Many students (and staff) presume online learning is wholly asynchronous and flexible: in practice, it rarely can be. Interactivity in your course will not cohere if students are encouraged to work through an online course entirely at their own pace and sequencing. Rather than a course-based cohort of learners, it becomes a collective of wholly self-directed learners, which can be isolating for them.

Despite the integration of rich multimedia and the availability of synchronous virtual classroom and web conferencing software, learning management system discussion forums often remain the heart of online learning: it is important to scaffold and sequence them accordingly. In terms of course structure, have a set of thematic modules work well. Within a module there might be one, two or three weeks, each with its own unit or lesson. Give the students access to all the units in a module when the module opens: in a three week module this gives them 21 days to structure when they make their initial postings. That also gives them ample time to check in with others’ contributions and to comment accordingly, with a great deal of flexibility. This is what is meant by quasi-synchronous.

Discussion forums need not require students to write mini essays, which can be labourious (to craft and to read) and crush interactivity through formality: students can do that sort of writing in their assessments. Instead, interactivity should be the focus. Encourage students to write “as if” in a seminar or tutorial discussion, using collegial, professional language to engage with the topic, rather than striving to quote from the literature verbatim. But their contributions still largely need to be substantive, rather than cursory.

A good strategy to ensure student engagement is to delineate clear participation frequency and quality expectations. Follow up early around students’ initiation with discussion forums, making it clear that while there is some built-in flexibility there are expectations with respect to the temporality of participation. Chase any who lag early on, offering support and reminding them of your expectations—and then leave them to it. Even students who perhaps bristled at being chased in the first week will have seen the benefit of having minimal benchmarks for participation and interactivity—and will, in fact, exceed them—as the course progresses.

Example: My course units run Monday to Sunday. I require students to post an initial contribution to the discussion by the end of Wednesday, along with a day by which they need to respond to their peers’ postings

(usually midday Saturday). If your LMS offers it, only allowing students to see their peers once they make their own gives every student a clean slate—and precludes those “Aoife/Hone/everyone already said what I was thinking” posts.

Integrate team-based learning, early

For many students, studying wholly online can feel isolating. In addition to interesting discussion forums each week, it is often worth purposively integrating some team-based learning (Michaelson, Bauman Knight & Fink, 2004).

Purposive team-based learning is structured in ways that allow different students to bring their particular strengths to a shared task, while also learning from the contributions of others. We know that in terms of post-degree employability, the ability to work effectively in a team environment has great currency (Berquist, et al, 2019). Team-based learning is one excellent tack towards developing a range of collaborative or communicative competencies including:

- Project management, scoping and planning
- Written communication
- Presentation skills
- Team management

However, team-based learning only works well if it is done *authentically*. Students can ascertain quickly if a shared task is more about rationalising (staff) assessment workload than their own learning.

An initial team-based learning activity is largely a catalyst. In addition to its own value, subsequently encouraging your students to continue working collaboratively, including peer review of each others’ assessments prior to submission, deepens the benefits of collaboration. In my courses, the students who avail themselves of this collaborative learning all do very well: the small number who struggle to pass are always among those who have eschewed team-based learning.

Examples: Ask student teams to create a just-in-time prototype of an object, template, or rubric in response to a scenario. Require them to share this with the wider class in a discussion forum. This forum will give each group exposure to a range of other scenarios, as well as how different teams approach the same task.

Model your assessment expectations in your scoping requirements

The instructions for an assessment cannot be longer than the word (or page) count for the assessment itself: if you cannot delineate a task’s parameters within the same constraints required of your students, it is unrealistic to expect students to meet said requirements.

To be fair this usually happens via “creep”, incrementally, over time:

1. Staff person introduces a new assessment, often one requiring brevity.
2. Students provide feedback that indicate more information would have supported their success, so staff person adds more information.
3. Subsequent cohorts of students pose further interesting and valid queries about the task, so responses to these are also integrated in the task information.
4. Students are vexed trying to meet all these expectations within a constrained word count.

We want our assessments to be cognitively challenging, in terms of the subject matter and the task. Our materials, regardless of any good intentions, should not create complexity in terms of understanding our expectations.

Example: structure your assessment instructions in the format you require students to use for the assessment. You are then confident of aligning your intentions and your practice.

Next steps

Our team will be building out two resources regarding this framework. The first will be a series of self-directed online modules, where staff can work through each of these with some exemplars and interactive, iterative engagement. The second will be a self-directed tool for staff to identify potential areas for them to explore in terms of their academic development. Our aim to begin piloting these later in 2023.

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