

## Case Study

# Using 'Blended Lectures' to deepen student engagement: The experience in a second-year module on Cultural Geographies.

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### Summary

This case study reflects upon the outcomes of introducing a 'blended lecture' approach to teaching on the engagement of a group of second year students. It reflects upon the quality and level of their engagement and the implications this has on performance in exam assessment.

### Module context

A second-year optional module in Cultural Geography, provides students with a theoretical and thematic grounding in the subject. For the 2015/16 session, as part of a reconfiguration of the module content and to address student feedback requesting more seminar-style interaction, 'blended lectures' were introduced.

Lectures that had previously been delivered in the lecture theatre, and later provided as an online podcast, were pre-recorded using Panopto, and posted on the VLE Canvas allowing the students to watch them in advance of interactive sessions. The students were also required to have read a related article before the lecture session, providing the focus for a structured seminar replacing the conventional lecture for a 'flipped' format (Rowley & Green, 2015). The seminar session required students, in small groups, to consider key questions raised by the paper, before moving on to address a chosen case study, that picked up the lecture themes, with structured questions and discussion. The result is the doubling of content delivered in the module, whilst providing a structured depth of engagement with key ideas via face-to-face interaction.

### Staff expectations

The module team expected the students to watch the lectures at a time convenient to them and to reflect on key ideas before engaging with the seminar material. This flexibility of engagement would allow students of varying abilities to engage with the content at their own pace. More importantly, blended lectures would do more than simply mix traditional and online content, but would encourage students to develop independent learning strategies to reinforce their understanding of the subject (Hinterberger et al., 2004; Moore & Gilmartin, 2010; Kanard, 2013). By providing all material a minimum of five days in advance of the session, students were also afforded plenty of opportunity to engage with the module team during office hours if required. Following Kanard (2013), the team also believed that blended delivery would improve exam performance, due to the students being more secure in their abilities to deploy their critical understanding of the subject matter.

### Concerns

One concern with making the lectures available in advance, was an anticipated decline in attendance by those that did not perceive value in attending the seminar sessions. Likewise, there was a concern that students would over-rely on the recordings rather than engaging with the breadth of module material. These concerns were borne out by the level of attendance. The module had 80 students registered, but the average attendance for the seminar sessions was in the mid-20s. This matches

the experience of a number of studies, which recorded a drop in attendance compared to live sessions (Brook & Beauchamp, 2015; Kanard, 2013).

A previously unconsidered issue that emerged was a change in the delivery dynamics of the lectures, as the course material was prepared in advance of the session. Prepared by staff members talking to the PowerPoint slides it was found that the vitality and performance qualities engendered by presenting to a room was diminished, which may have detracted from the student's engagement with the recordings.

### Evaluation and assessment of engagement

To gauge the reaction to the new delivery format and the overall response from the student body we evaluated the module in three ways:

- Using the standard module feedback forms.
- Issuing students with an additional form at the same time which asked specific questions about the students' experience of using Panopto (lecture recording) and of attending the workshops.
- Follow-up focus groups were held by a neutral party after the examination was taken. Two groups – one that had attended 80%+ of workshops and one that had attended 20% or less – were then invited to discuss whether they felt their engagement had influenced their exam preparation.

By triangulating these different evaluations, we hoped to gain a greater depth of understanding about how the students perceived the change in delivery, the workload and the course material. The focus group aimed to provide a qualitative element to examine if there were any links between the level of engagement with Panopto, workshop attendance and exam performance.

### Is there a connection between engagement and performance?

It is always difficult to evaluate the impact of teaching intervention after one cycle of implementation, however, some initial indicators of impact can be identified. One measure of the success of blended/flipped lectures can be seen in exam performance. Panopto allows the instructor to examine a range of statistics as to who accesses the online lectures, how often they do so, and for how long. It also enabled the team to observe engagement during the semester's teaching period, and the two week period immediately before the exam (cf. Owston et al., 2013).

### Observations

The 20 students who engaged most fully with the lecture videos were identified by the number of minutes watched at the end of the second semester. Out of these students, those that attended 80% or more of the seminar sessions were noted (12 out of 20). This cohort's exam performance was then checked. All of these students scored 66% and above for each exam answer, with half the students scoring marks >70% on at least one question.

Of those that only engaged in watching the online videos, and who attended 20% or less of seminars the average mark was 58%.

This matches the comments made by students made in the focus groups following the exam. For those that attended most sessions, they noted that, '*... although it felt like a lot of work, it was worth it, and was a massive advantage going into the exam.*' One student observed that '*it made it easier to move beyond the lecture material in the exam*' enabling them to engage with the exam questions in a more critical and reflective manner.

### Reflection on practice

In light of our observations, along with student comments and feedback, a number of positives can be taken from a blended/flipped teaching approach to this module. This must be tempered, however, with improvements in delivery and expectation management going forward.

Students like the flexibility of access to the pre-recorded lectures on Canvas, allowing them to listen and make notes at their own pace. For those attending the seminars regularly, this enabled them to be proactive in targeting reading around the topic areas. A significant number, however, preferred the spontaneity of traditional face-to-face lectures and only really engaged with the recordings as exams approached.

As a theoretically driven course, the seminars encouraged the students to explore and debate ideas, and apply these to practical examples. For those that regularly attended, this fostered debate and wider thought. However, for many the prospect of speaking in front of other students was onerous and even intimidating. The discussed format for delivery will be used again in the 2016/17, with some minor tweaks. Greater attention will be paid to setting the expectations of work-level, at the beginning of the module, as well as reinforcing the key skills that will be developed. In addition, strategies will be developed to increase the ways in which students feedback to the group.

### References

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Table 1: Examples of student responses and comments.

Positive	Negative
<b>How much of the course content did you engage with?</b>	
<i>'Did all the wider reading and watched the videos, but the seminars were a bit scary.'</i>	<i>'I listened to all the lectures, but not all the way through.'</i>
<i>'All of it and felt the seminars helped challenge your ideas.'</i>	<i>'Hard to get it all done (reading and listening to language) especially when expected to engage so if haven't done work you really unlikely to go.'</i>
<b>How do the pre-recorded lectures rate against attending a live lecture?</b>	
<i>'Easier to make comprehensive notes.'</i>	<i>'I get easily distracted at home and often forgot to watch the lectures.'</i>
<i>'Panopto allowed you to focus, you could pause and make notes.'</i>	<i>'Less motivating.'</i>
<b>What aspects of the seminars did you like?</b>	
<i>'Makes you feel like you are discussing ideas properly.'</i>	<i>'The way people reported back was at times awkward and repetitive.'</i>
<i>'You had a better interaction with the staff and it forces you to engage with the ideas.'</i>	
<i>'Talking and hearing – wider sense of what's being said – not just what's being lectured.'</i>	
<b>How useful were the workshops for developing your understanding?</b>	
<i>'... it builds on the lecture material and due to talking about it... you remember it more.'</i>	<i>'If you hadn't done the work it was hard to engage.'</i>
<i>'It brings more purpose to the lecture...'</i>	
<i>'Alternative interpretations of ideas/readings could be explored.'</i>	