Building an Online Undergraduate Module from a Graduate Module: A Case Study

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Online teaching has not as yet penetrated too deeply into the undergraduate culture, and most successful programs are targeted towards vocational learning or postgraduate courses. This case study details the experiences of translating a successful online teaching paradigm used in a fully online postgraduate degree to an undergraduate degree program. The main objective of this case study is to determine the appropriateness of using the postgraduate model at undergraduate level by examining the performance of three separate undergraduate groups studying a re-designed online undergraduate subject. As the graduate model is based on a semi-Socratic paradigm of initial discussion questions and follow-on weekly discussions, it was not at all clear that such a paradigm would be applicable at the undergraduate level. Given the limited working experience of undergraduates, a translation of the paradigm could lose its effectuality on the target student population. Yet the changing demographics of students suggests an online subject based on this paradigm may be successful.

Keywords: asynchronous discussion; asynchronous education; online teaching; virtual classroom; virtual learning

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Victoria University is a relatively new university, being formed as recently as 1992 from the merger of two former Institutes of Technology. The recent addition of the Western Melbourne Institute of Technical and Further Education, which was previously involved primarily with industrial training, has made Victoria University into one of Australia’s largest universities. It is one of only five dual-sector universities catering to a wide range of tertiary students from the central and western suburbs of Melbourne. Victoria University has over 50,000 students and over 3,000 staff, along with more than 2,300 international students studying both offshore and onshore.

The School of Information Systems conducts undergraduate and graduate courses in a diverse range, including the core Bachelor of Business (Information Systems), Electronic Com-
merce, and specialist joint degrees in Arts Multimedia, Music Industry and Electronic Commerce, Marketing/Electronic Commerce, and Law/Electronic Commerce. Graduate degrees include the Master degrees in Information Systems and Enterprise Resource Planning. Within these degrees, the school offers a very diverse range of subjects. Some are quite technical in nature while others are much more generally business-related. On average, students tend to mix electives across both ends of this spectrum. The latest technology is used in all information systems degrees and joint degrees.

As a new and rapidly changing technological institution, Victoria University has been very conscious of the need to continually reevaluate its curriculum, and to look for new ways of best providing for the needs of its students and the business community that it serves, in a cost-effective manner. The location of the University and the general demographics of the students undertaking study often mean that many students, including full-time students, are engaged in part-time employment. Anecdotal evidence previously suggested a changing profile for undergraduate students, where many continue to work part-time while studying. However, the increasing level of student employment is now documented as a wider trend in the community (ABS, 2004). There are also many mature-age students returning to study to gain an undergraduate degree. Thus, the changing profile of the student population dictates a need for more flexibility.

Victoria University does not yet have a coherent approach to online learning. The University does have a Center for Educational Development and Support (CEDS) that has a small team promoting online learning initiatives throughout the University. However, at the “coal face,” most efforts by academic staff are hybrid efforts consisting of traditional face-to-face teaching supported by Web sites with posted downloadable files, or further learning materials. This is not an indictment on the staff, but a reflection on busy schedules and the wider lack of penetration of online learning into undergraduate teaching.

Victoria University is currently engaged in a number of activities through CEDS (Center for Educational Development & Support) to promote and incorporate online teaching into the undergraduate curriculum. A number of small internal University grants were established to promote these activities, and the efforts described in this case study are a result of one such grant.

SETTING THE STAGE

We briefly outline some differences in academic terminology between Australia and North America. In Australia, students will study a particular course to gain an award, such as a degree. The course is made up of a number of subjects (or units/modules). Confusion in terminology can arise because what Australians would refer to as a “subject” would be referred to in North America as a “course.” These are summarized in Table 1.

The dominant paradigm for teaching and learning at Universities has been described as pedagogy (Heuer & King, 2004; Laureate Online Education, 2003). An emerging paradigm suitable for online teaching and learning has been referred to as andragogy (Heuer & King, 2004; Laureate Online Education, 2003). The major differences between the paradigms are summarized in Table 2: Two teaching and learning paradigms (Laureate Online Education, 2003; Pelz, 2004). The emerging paradigm prefers the term facilitator or moderator to that of teacher or instructor. In an online environment, the term is e-facilitator or e-moderator (Heuer & King, 2004; Salmon, 2000).

There are a number of approaches to the facilitation or moderation of an online class. Bedore et al. (Bedore, Bedore, & Bedore, 1998) suggest a useful classification of interactive, bounded interactive, consultative, independent, and special configuration. The role of the facilitator varies with each approach principally because of the different levels of interactivity required. In the case of the interactive approach, where a class size is about 10-15 students and
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