
Satisfying teachers: Converting conventional courses to a flexible learning format - practicalities, challenges and issues

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This paper describes the Auckland College of Education's pilot programme in developing courses in a flexible learning format to give teachers access to its Bachelor of Education (Teaching) qualification. It summarises an initial phase where key principles of learning were developed, an infrastructure was established and protocols implemented. It critically examines the issues and identifies the challenges.

It describes in more detail responses and comments from teachers. These give a clear indication of what they wish to see in flexible learning courses.

Finally, it compares and contrasts the institutional and teacher perspectives, suggesting a way forward that meets the needs of both.

The Pilot Study - A Background

In late 1997 changes to the salary structure for primary teachers were an incentive for them to upgrade their Diplomas of Teaching to Q3 (degree) status. At a time where preservice graduates were also graduating with a degree, the response from teachers was an increasing demand for access to the College's B.Ed (Teaching) degree.

In 1998, The Auckland College of Education (ACE) offered four different, flexible means through which teachers might access B.Ed (Teaching) modules.

They could

- join preservice students in mainstream modules
- attend some of the few modules which were offered on-site in selected schools
- choose classes at ACE established specifically for teachers outside school hours
- enrol in modules that were designed in a flexible learning format and largely offered off-site

The pilot study refers to these last modules offered off-site. One module, *Communication and Information Technology (C.I.T.)*, was developed for semester one, 1998, while two further modules, *Introduction to Research Methods* and *Introduction to Technology Education*, were developed for semester two.

Before modules were developed however, principles of learning that were to underpin module design and development were established and refined. Some of those key principles were:

- learning should promote interaction of the learner with others and be co-constructivist rather than individualistic
- content should be context free and applicable to a range of work situations in a variety of sectors
- accepted principles of adult learning should be acknowledged and integrated (Winn, in Thorpe, 1995)
- learning relationships created should deny dependence and create independent, inquiring and motivated learners (Thorpe, 1995)
- courseware should be structured with a greater level of scaffolding for learners in the early stages of a module
- there should be an element of face to face contact in all modules (benefits discussed in Lockwood, 1992)
- learning should promote self-reflection (Smyth, in Evans & Nation, 1989)
- learners should have a reasonable expectation that they could successfully complete each module with the materials supplied in ACE's learning packages

Guidelines for staff writing the modules were also created.

All modules were largely print based, supported by media. All required a degree of on-campus contact, typically two days per module. Most needed to be completed within a single semester timeframe. An academic staff member supported each learner in her/his learning. The existing structure that was established for primary teacher retraining was used as the infrastructure for flexible learning: administrative inquiries and assessment tasks were routed through there, while each College Centre (Department) had academic oversight of modules.

Issues and Challenges

Challenges and issues were identified at an early planning stage, or in delivery of the first module. These included:

- the potential for learners to be isolated from each other
- the need to promote interaction (outlined in Evans, 1998)
- balancing individual needs and learning styles against pre-determined learning outcomes (choice is discussed by Delany and Wenmouth, 1998)
- staff mindsets - fixed views of the potential of flexible learning, and a focus on teaching rather than learning
- moderation
- comparability with modules delivered in a conventional format
- tracking growing numbers of teachers
- determining how best the Library might support these learners

Most of the issues were resolved before the module was delivered to teachers. Other issues tended to be resolved on the first contact day with learners (see Reid, 1998).

Phase One: Teacher Feedback

Evaluation of the pilot project came from those most closely involved: Heads of Centres, lecturers, administrative staff and learners. Although many issues had been resolved early, informal comments from the teachers enrolled suggested that workload and assessment were problems.

The regular forwarding of a Journal with diary entries to the contact lecturer had been seen by lecturers as formative assessment. This was emphatically re-interpreted by the teachers as summative assessment. In addition, teachers seemed to be putting much more effort into their Journal entries than preservice students. The process was becoming a burden.

Purpose

It was decided to evaluate the teachers' perceptions more formally. The College's Flexible Learning Coordinator was asked to check teacher progress through the

module, gauge reaction to the flexible learning process itself and complete a module evaluation.

Methodology

Although the teachers enrolled in this module had theoretically up to two semesters to complete it, most chose to complete it within one semester. Over half the teachers attended an on-campus day early in the first semester where they completed a comprehensive written evaluation. Those who did not attend had the evaluation mailed out.

The module evaluation was a mix of open ended questions (e.g. “aspects of the module I liked best, aspects I liked least, suggestions I would make for improvement”) and statements to be placed on a four-point Likert scale, ranging from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. The scale used had no neutral midpoints. Aspects covered were the module itself (learning outcomes, content, amount of material, difficulty, assessment, feedback given, learner choice, active learning, self-directed learning and reflection), the lecturer and the flexible learning format (the study guides, readings, administrative inquiries, workshops, support services, communication and study groups). In addition, the Coordinator met face-to-face with teachers who attended the on-campus day and was able to discuss their issues in greater depth. This paper covers the first two aspects, the module itself and the flexible learning format.

Results

1. The Module Itself

This module was seen to have relatively clear learning outcomes, to be relevant, allow for learner choice, and promote self-directed learning and reflection. Criteria for assessment tasks were clearly stated, constructive comments were given and teachers saw the seminar presentations as very valuable.

Comment: “This course enabled me to understand what CIT is - it gave me the motivation to set goals and to achieve them....”

However, there was also seen to be an unmanageable level of content, and inappropriate types of assessment loading. The teachers were adamant that the level of work required and the amount of work were excessive and unrelated to the module’s

credit value. They made comparisons with other modules and could not find another module that made greater demands. Consequently, many teachers felt stressed.

Comment: "The workload was huge."

The teachers also commented on the great growth they had personally made with information technology, and praised the opportunity to link and work with others. They often commented positively on how they were 'stretched' and had grown.

Comment: "I have never learnt so much, so actively, so willingly. I have really enjoyed the opportunity to develop my skills and increase my learning."

Suggestions for improvement included streamlining the module, examining and redefining the assessment tasks, and meeting on-campus earlier in the programme, particularly to set expectations and link with other teachers.

Comment: "I'd like an orientation day at the beginning to enable teachers to meet and 'buddy up' earlier."

2. The Flexible Learning Format

Courseware: Study guides were seen to be clearly written, well sequenced and organised, user-friendly, and sent out when expected. The initial post-out may have contained too much material. Readings were useful and most administrative inquiries well resolved. Study groups were seen as beneficial and newsletters assisted learning.

Comment: "I enjoyed working on the research with a partner."

The Lecturer: Many teachers sent personal thanks. Responses to E-mail were seen to be slow at time.

Comment: "X was very positive and helpful. His comments on my assignments were very positive and helpful - made you feel successful."

The Centre for Flexible Learning: Teachers strongly supported evaluation of the module. Some thought an introduction to staff from the Centre for Flexible Learning on the first on-campus day would have been a good idea.

Comment: "It was good to see some changes made during the running of the course."

The Library: Generally comments were supportive and helpful. The Library's workshop was endorsed and its service seen as helpful. It was thought that Library workshops should be early in the module, optional and cater for a greater variety of needs.

Comment: "The staff genuinely wanted to help teachers - they were kind and helpful."

The Design Team: The concept of flexible learning was endorsed. More guidance may have been necessary for those unused to Journal writing. Opportunity for teachers to complete a self-assessment of their proficiency and understanding of information technology in the profiles they initially completed was thought to be worthwhile.

Comment: "I hope they continue to be open to our feedback and continue to offer us great opportunities."

Phase One: Issues and Challenges

Most teachers found this module frustrating but rewarding. There were many great aspects: interacting and working with other professionals, having control over the pace, place and style of learning, workshops and seminars to increase the skill base and share expertise, good courseware and support when needed.

However....., the assessment tasks *were* complex and workload *was* excessive. What had seemed a good idea - to ask teachers to send material in regularly for formative assessment - became in its own right summative assessment and a burden. Many teachers felt they were completing double the workload they expected.

Comment: "I feel strongly that the work involved in this unit was excessive. While I acknowledge it is a degree paper and should involve quite a lot of readings and student input, the amount actually involved was far greater than other papers I have completed."

Receiving these comments before the module ended allowed some adjustments to be made. It also allowed those involved in designing the next two modules to incorporate teacher comment to produce a more equitable module with a workload better comparable to that of teachers attending contact classes.

The design team for *Introduction to Research Methods* had each study guide read and commented upon by an independent person with no knowledge of that subject area. The insights gained through this process were so helpful and the process seen to be so valuable, that it has become incorporated into all future module development.

Phase One: Recommendations

Based on the comments from the teachers as well as comment from the Centre for Flexible Learning and the lecturer taking the module, the following recommendations were made. These were that:

- assessment be reviewed with the possibility of the Journal and Workbook being amalgamated, neither to be submitted by teachers for assessment
- tasks or exercises incorporated into learning material be reviewed to ensure manageability
- an optional on-campus day be organised early, that it offer a Library orientation to those who require it and examine reasonable expectations of roles of staff and learners
- where feasible teachers be encouraged to develop optional self-supporting study groups on the first on-campus day
- key Library and Centre for Flexible Learning staff meet with teachers at this early on-campus day
- teacher profiles include a 'snapshot' where teachers assess their own proficiency with technology
- initially only the Introductory Study Guide and Study Guide One be posted to teachers. The next study guide to be triggered by the return of the completed teacher profile.

- E-mail and assignment response times be reiterated and included in the Introductory Study Guide
- Library workshops on user education could be generic and open to all teachers as ACE students, allowing a specific focus (if necessary) for individual modules
- the Student Learning Unit be asked on a trial basis in late 1998/early 1999 to offer a workshop called “A Return to Tertiary Study”.

Phase Two: Changes Made to Subsequent Modules

Most of the recommendations could be incorporated into subsequent modules immediately.

During the design phase of the next two modules very careful attention was paid to the amount of workload associated with the courseware. Where material appeared to be overlong it was edited, and set readings included in a study guide had to be justified as seminal works. Exercises that teachers were asked to complete (optionally) were scrutinised. The aim was to have between five and seven study guides of up to ten hours work each.

The result of these moves trimmed material and reinforced one of those principles of learning on which ACE’s flexible learning approach was based: that teachers should have an expectation to complete each module with courseware supplied. When learners sought to seek out recommended and supplementary readings this produced a richer learning path and possibly better module grades. However, that would be their choice as learners.

Assessment tasks were also more carefully scrutinised in regard to suitability and comparability. We wanted them to be challenging but not onerous, and we certainly did not want to create a model of dependence where material was sent back and forth to a contact lecturer for approval. There was, however, an acknowledgment of greater assurance and scaffolding for learners needed towards the beginning of each module, as well as the recognition that most learners might want to be linked with others in some form of interaction.

We found that the earlier the first contact day came, the more successful the module appeared to be for learners, particularly where roles and responsibilities were carefully spelled out.

Some teachers who had been enrolled in the pilot module were enrolled in the subsequent modules, *Introduction to Technology Education* and *Introduction to Research Methods*. They particularly had been asked to comment in these subsequent modules in a way that made comparisons with the *Communication and Information Technology* module they had completed.

Phase Two: Teacher Feedback

We were keen to receive comments from teachers in these subsequent modules. From their perspective, had there been any improvement? Did the flexible learning format actually give them greater control over their learning or did it constrain them? Were there further significant issues to address?

Methodology

As we wanted feedback early in the semester, there was no structured rating scale used this time, just a series of open ended questions relating to each of the sections highlighted in the previous evaluation: the module, the lecturer, the flexible learning format, the support services (like the ACE library), the administrative system, as well as previously identified issues such as workload and assessment tasks.

In addition, the College's Flexible Learning Coordinator met with half the teachers completing the *Introduction to Research Methods* module and discussed face to face issues they saw as important.

Results

This time the results were quite different.

There were no common issues though individual teachers had minor 'niggles'.

In each case the individual modules were seen to be of significant worth in their own right. Teachers found the courseware challenging, yet enjoyable. Where a journal was used, because of the different emphasis, it tended to be a more satisfying chronicle of development and progress rather than a record sent to a lecturer for validation. On-campus days that allowed for group or individual consultation were seen to be critical. It wasn't that teachers were seeking approval, but rather that early in their progress

through the module some needed assurance they were 'on the right track'. As the module progressed the need for this lessened.

Many of the teachers initially focussed strongly on the assessment tasks, yet where these were incorporated into the on-campus days, reassurance tended to reorientate the focus onto learning.

This time there were many more aspects teachers wished to praise. They liked the study guide format, the readings and the exercises (although again, a very small number of learners tended to read every single word and spend excessive time on completing simple exercises in depth - this tended to be related to a learning style.) They did not see the workload as excessive as some aspects of the assessment tasks had been incorporated into the on-campus days. They made contact with other learners early and where teachers wished to be supported by study groups these were initiated early and gave maximum benefit.

Seminars and workshops were seen as particularly supportive and instrumental in learning.

The Library service was seen to be of quality and the workshops which were taken were well received. This was partly because they were optional, but also because teachers could either add to or hone existing skills, take an orientation or not, as they chose.

The most satisfactory comments came from those teachers who had been enrolled in the first module offered in flexible learning format, and who had complained about the excessive workload and assessment. These teachers specifically commented on how they saw the subsequent modules as more equitable, how the process had improved. They also endorsed the idea of the College asking them for their opinion and then incorporating that into improving instruction.

Phase Two: Issues and Challenges

By evaluating modules during delivery rather than at the end, ACE was able to see trends and incorporate teacher wisdom into course design while modules following the pilot module were being developed.

In doing this, the two main issues raised earlier were faced and decisions made and implemented that meant that they no longer remained issues for subsequent modules. Teachers rated all aspects of the infrastructure and design as satisfactory or better.

The challenge will be to fine tune the process and to develop a more sophisticated course design and concept of teaching,

“whereby decisions are made *while instruction is underway*, rather than teachers working solely towards ends predetermined by module writers.” (Reid 1998)

An option is to develop modules, which resemble a ‘doughnut’, reasonably firm on the outside and reasonably soft on the inside, with enough flexibility to include learner input, negotiation and manipulation. This way of working would allow individual learners to personalise and tailor the learning process to their own very specific needs. An implication is that learning outcomes would need to be carefully examined and in some cases rewritten in terms broad enough to allow this.

Summary

This paper outlined a pilot study in converting face to face (contact) modules of a professional teaching degree to a flexible learning format for teachers seeking to upgrade their qualification from an existing diploma to a degree. It described the principles of learning upon which the initiative in flexible learning was based and stated the issues and challenges identified at an early stage.

The paper reported on the first phase, an initial module *Communication and Information Technology*, and the reactions of teachers to it. It described workload and assessment as issues identified by teachers and showed how these issues had been dealt with in subsequent modules.

It described a second phase where two further modules (*Introduction to Research Methods* and *Introduction to Technology Education*) better satisfied teachers, and suggested that the biggest challenge of the future will be in developing courses and courseware that were flexible enough to meet the quality management demands of institutions and audit agencies, yet also capable of individualising instruction in a way that teachers and other learners believe meets their own personal learning needs. It is this that formed the development for the future.

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