

Blended learning: a personal, practical perspective

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I facilitate short non-award courses for executives and executive MBA students. I do this locally and overseas. For many years I have embedded Malcolm Knowles' six principles of andragogy in adult education to improve adult learning. In this chapter I will concentrate on my use of blended learning with executive MBA students, starting with a background overview before ending with an evaluation of my experience with blended learning.

Malcolm Knowles' six principles of andragogy

Knowles described andragogy as the art and science of adult learning. His theory can be stated with six assumptions related to the motivation of adult learning¹: (1) Adults need to know why they need to learn something; (2) Adults need to build on their experience (including errors); (3) Adults have a need to feel responsible for their learning; (4) Adults are ready to learn if learning solves an immediate problem; (5) Adults want their training to be problem focused; and (6) Adults learn best when motivation comes from within rather externally. As will be seen below I use these principles on a day-to-day basis.

Success is often elusive

In 1981 I commenced a graduate course in Taxation Law. In 1986 Stephen Carty, the head of the law department where I had studied, offered me the opportunity to teach Business Law in the evenings. When questioned he said that the full-time lecturers did not want to teach in the evenings. I accepted the offer. I was very motivated. At the end of the first lecture a delegation comprising a number of students approached Stephen asking for me to be removed as my lecturing was so bad. As luck would have it Stephen was very kind man and sat me down and quietly spoke to me about the facts of life in education. Nealy 40 years later embarrassingly I still vividly recall him looking at me and saying, "Son, you need only use one case as an example and not 100...". As I listened, Julius Caesar's 47 BC statement *veni, vidi, vici* (I came, I saw I conquered) was in my mind and thought, I came, I taught and I failed. However, luck was very much with me as Stephen gave me another chance, and he agreed to mentor me. Had he growled and taken a different approach with me that would have been the end of my teaching career and I would not be writing this chapter.

Improvement over time

Over time I worked hard to learn how to be a better adult educator, but never forgot the vital other side - the adult learner - or counterparty in lawyer talk. Knowles' principles are indelibly etched into my mind, and I use them on a daily basis. I still practise as a solicitor and CPA advising on business improvement, and do this to keep current, and provide my students with interesting and current case studies. However, my true passion, and most of my time, now is

¹ Knowles, M., Holton, E., and Swanson, R., *The Adult Learner – The Definitive Classic in Adult Education and Human Resource Development*, 5 ed 1998, Butterworth-Heinemann, Woburn, MA, USA

focussed on adult education through the training of executives and lecturing to executive MBA students at the Universal Business School Sydney's² (UBSS) Executive Delivery MBA. It took a long time, but I now feel comfortable delivering to executives, and I prefer this category of student. I have received two UBSS Executive Dean Teaching Awards (2020 and 2021).

The UBSS Executive Delivery MBA

At UBSS there is an MBA that caters for two markets. The one for international students tends to be for younger students mainly from overseas, and the Executive Delivery MBA tends to be for older domestic students with more high-level work experience. My focus is on the latter. Senior Management at UBSS has worked hard to make the Executive Delivery MBA as engaging and as valuable an experience as possible for the students. This is done in a number of ways –

It is a fact of life that the typical executive delivery MBA student is in a very vulnerable part of their life: working hard to prove themselves to get promotions and increased salaries, and then going home to more work in the form of a young family. The holy-grail would be to find a better, and less abrasive way, to complete executive education such as an MBA, and obtain an education that is practical, with key learnings that will “stick”.

The UBSS model is designed around a subject being taught in a CBD six times per year - that is once every two months. Given there are 16 units in the MBA the program, then, can be completed in less than three years - on a part-time basis.

The typical subject is run as follows: the *printed/online materials* would be provided at the beginning of the month, about four weeks before the face-to-face class. The class at the end of the month is three consecutive days, a Friday, Saturday, and a Sunday, and is held at an up-market hotel, currently the Primus Hotel in Sydney in the Windsor Hotel in Melbourne. After the third face-to-face class the students have two weeks to complete their major assessment, and then two weeks to rest before the next subject commences. Minor assessments occur during the three face-to-face days including quizzes and short answer questions. These are answered using mobile devices.

The students are prescribed reading in the four weeks prior to class. In the first week they are to read up on the first face-to-face day's classes, then in the second week the second face-to-face day's classes and the third week the third face-to-face day's classes. In the 4th week they are to summarise the prior three weeks and complete a number of activities.

Students have a one-hour Zoom session one night per week with their lecturer. There are two reasons for this. The first is that it allows students to discuss any issues in relation to the subject; review set activities and case studies; as well as going through the key principles in that week's content. The second reason is for the teacher to ensure that all students are adhering to the timelines and keep them engaged. This active review is preferred rather than a passive review comprising an email with a lecturer's suggestion to do certain reading and activities. The lecturer contacts those who did not attend (if any) to briefly speak with them to ensure they are not falling behind.

² www.UBSS.edu.au.

Each of the three face-to-face teaching days has four sessions, totalling 12 sessions for the three days. If the MBA was for some reason taught over 12 weeks, then each session would represent a week, with more materials, activities, case studies added where necessary. The four daily sessions are: the first being before the morning break; the second before lunch; the third before the afternoon break; and the fourth is before the end of the day. Each session is approximately 1 ½ hours in length, with 30 minutes for each of the morning and afternoon breaks and one hour for lunch. This allows plenty of time to rest, network, speak about the assessment and consume food and beverages. Each session is based on Knowles' principles and comprises three parts: an introduction to the theory, one or more activities and a review of the materials. In some classes there may be assessment requirements, often a quiz or short answer questions.

In each subject an industry expert is invited to speak, and this normally occurs in the 10th session - that is the session before lunch on the last day. Students are asked in advance to suggest topics, including those that may cover their chosen areas for the final major assessment. The guest speaker is requested to keep the discussion practical and encouraged to stay for lunch and mingle with the students. Any faculty who happened to be available on the day are invited to attend the presentation, meet the students and have lunch with all present.

Clearly there needs to be a focus on learning and teaching. In relation to learning it is important to remember that the learners are customers. We all know that this is something that does not always happen, especially in the prestigious universities. They are to be treated with respect and in a business-like manner. Male lecturers are expected to dress in business suits and ties, and women with the equivalent. Lecturer failure to attend an agreed class is treated very seriously. Expertise with the subject matter is mandatory, as is experience in teaching executives.

In many cases COVID-19 has been, and seems to be for some time, a major disruptor. However, based on the above it is my experience that COVID-19 is more of an irritant. This is because the classes can easily be taught online either over the three weeks, or over the weekend but instead of being face-to-face it will be online.

Blended learning: a practical perspective

Professor Andy West noted (Chapter 2) that Bonk and Graham defined "blended learning systems" as learning systems that "combine face-to-face (F2F) instruction with computer mediated instruction."³ I have been involved with MBA courses, continuously for 30 years now, both as a student and as a lecturer, and as an undergraduate lecturer for 5 years before that. My teaching has occurred in many formats including F2F, hybrid, distance learning and blended learning. I consider that the above UBSS blended learning model is advantageous for many reasons and that it provides a way to balance three viciously competitive components: study, work and family. After now teaching the UBSS blended model for two years I wish my own MBA was undertaken in such a blended learning way, as mine was very

³ Bonk, C and Graham, C (Eds.). (2006). Handbook of blended learning: Global Perspectives, local designs. San Francisco, CA: Pfeiffer Publishing.

difficult due to high study, work and family expectations. I would have learned quicker, easier, retained and enjoyed it more. It is my opinion that for the learner blended learning provides more engagement, satisfaction with a reduced dropout rate. On the other side, it makes it easier for the lecturer to be more engaged, achieve more job satisfaction and a lower probability of the learner leaving the School / profession.

These positive issues can only benefit the School. I am very much in favour of blended learning, and strongly believe it has considerable advantage over other types of learning including hybrid and online learning.



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