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RISE OF A MASSIVE ON-CAMPUS COURSE (MOCC)

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ABSTRACT

Communication and Thought (COR109) is the first mandatory course at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). It experienced significant logistical challenges in the design of relevant, whole-of-institution content, the management of 60 teaching staff and faculty support, and the allocation of adequate space for both lectures and tutorials for the students. This paper discusses the challenges and solutions of COR109 in its inaugural semester. It discusses transition pedagogy, overviews the scale of COR109, and explains the management and communication structure of a massive on-campus course. As this is one of the first courses offered in an Australian university that is compulsory for all commencing students, the experience acquired may be useful for other institutions considering similar approaches. Key considerations for success include proper planning, creative logistics, pedagogically sound solutions and curriculum-integrated support for both students and staff.

KEYWORDS

First year course management; communication; professional development; timetabling; staff costing

INTRODUCTION

In semester one, 2014, *Communication and Thought* (COR109) became the first compulsory course (unit/subject) for all students enrolled in their first semester of study at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), regardless of their program of undergraduate study. The first semester offering had an enrolment of 2,415 students, which created significant logistical challenges in the design of relevant, whole-of-institution content, the management of 60 teaching staff and faculty support, and the allocation of adequate space for both lectures and tutorials for the students. Furthermore, the development of the course had to satisfy all relevant USC stakeholders. The processes of consultation and development of this massive on-campus course were conducted over a 13-month period and the result has been positively evaluated by students and staff with early indications suggesting it will not only achieve its set goals, but will also have unforeseen beneficial impacts on the student and staff experience.

This paper discusses the implementation of COR109 as a massive on-campus course for first-year students and the relevant course management considerations. First, it discusses how transition pedagogy is used as a template for designing a course that provides broad-scale generic academic skills to improve the first-year experience of students. Second, it provides an overview of the scale of COR109 by discussing the locations the course is taught and the number of weekly lectures and tutorials involved. In particular, it discusses enrolment and

timetabling challenges and currently implemented solutions. Since student attendance was integral to the success of the course and given that the deputy vice-chancellor's mandated that every student would be provided a place in a lecture, creating and maintaining a sustainable timetable was a priority. Finally, an explication of the course management, communication structure and professional development is provided, to offer an overview of how a course of this size can be managed and sustained.

TRANSITION PEDAGOGY

Transition pedagogy is an approach to student-centred teaching and learning that is based on a holistic approach to student engagement and learning at university. It is, more specifically, an approach to curriculum design and facilitation that incorporates all university support systems and processes, including academic, study skill, counselling, library and career support. COR109 was designed and facilitated with transition pedagogy so that it may provide the optimal vehicle for dealing with increasingly diverse student cohorts, many of whom are likely to need extra support with transition into higher education, by facilitating a sense of engagement, support and belonging (Kift et al., 2010).

In line with transition pedagogy is the view that personal, social and academic competences of students have to be addressed by institutional-wide and integrated support facilities (Reason et al., 2007). Addressing these competencies cannot be left to chance; instead, concerted efforts should be made to 'actively integrate students into the university community' (Krause, 2001, p. 149). Institution-wide integration addresses what McInnis identifies as the challenge of 'bridging the gaps between academic, administrative and support programs' (McInnis, 2003, p. 13).

This approach aligns with the findings of Kift et al. (2010) that a mature approach to an effective cross-institutional first year in higher education is to embed engagement and support facilities and experiences *into* the curriculum. The curriculum design of COR109, therefore attempted to integrate institution-wide support facilities, hitherto described as discrete, siloed organisations (McInnis, 2003), into a coordinated and holistic curriculum. This broad conceptualisation of the curriculum aims to encompass the 'totality of the undergraduate student experience of, and engagement with, their new program of tertiary study' (Kift, 2009, p. 9), through focussing holistically on the 'educational conditions in which we place students' (Tinto, 2009, p. 2).

A coordinated and holistic curriculum design for a massive course is important to consider for a number of reasons. First, the approach to course management and delivery should be based on a whole of institution approach supported by literature. Second, there were numerous environmental challenges and solutions identified as part of the course planning process and delivery. Third, in order to deliver a massive course, appropriate and strategic support must be provided to both students and staff as part of the curriculum implementation.

Incorporating transition pedagogy strategies

The following specific strategies reflect how COR109 is founded on transition pedagogy and is designed to transcend 'the silos of academic, administrative and support areas' (McInnis, 2003).

Strategy 1: COR109 is offered to all students, regardless of faculty or program of study.

Strategy 2: COR109 offers tutorials in week one, as opposed to only offering a lecture in week one with tutorials starting in week two. Through the use of icebreaker activities, this affords students an early opportunity to connect with peers and tutors, thus fostering a sense of connectedness, which is a key component of success at university (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010).

Strategy 3: In both the lecture and tutorial in the first week, the key predictors of success at university (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008) are shown and discussed, so that students know what they can do, and what support facilities the university offers in order to provide them with the greatest chance of success.

Strategy 4: In addition to introducing students to these normative accounts of predictors of success, tutorials also provide opportunities for tutors and students to discuss how strategies for success can be best incorporated into the lived experience of individual students. For example, a time management activity in week one raises awareness of the work, family and other non-study commitments of individual students and facilitates discussion on how such commitments might be managed. It also provides tutors with an opportunity to introduce students to the financial and counselling support services available to students for advice and assistance in these areas.

The belief in the need for tutors to appreciate who students are and ‘how they identify themselves’ (Gale, 2012, p. 251) is also reflected in the flexible approach to assessment, with students able to approach their own tutor to negotiate extensions and resubmissions rather than follow more formal avenues. Such an approach recognises that for students from under-represented or marginalised backgrounds, the university curriculum constitutes ‘a challenge to one’s identity and a threat to familiar ways of knowing and doing’ (Krause, 2006, p. 1). In order to provide a sense of inclusivity, students are also exposed to the personalised accounts of the trajectories of successful students and staff, including those from traditionally marginalised backgrounds.

Strategy 5: COR109 integrates library support in a number of ways. Library staff members attend every lecture in week two to introduce themselves and put a face to library support services and resources, which include workshops and a support desk where students can ask questions and request assistance in carrying out basic library search strategies. Drop-in library support is also offered at strategically placed times throughout the semester, such as in the weeks before COR109 assessments are due.

Online library tutorials, called ‘captivates’, are strategically imbedded into lectures and tutorials as ‘just in time’ resources. For example, during the week that students are required to search for specific literature to support their assessment development, a library-developed captivate is integrated into the tutorial, and a library based workshop related to the activity is designed and advertised in tutorial. Several captivates are integrated within COR109’s curriculum design such as ‘How to locate a journal article’, ‘How to read a research paper for purpose’, and ‘How to extrapolate information from a peer reviewed source’. Finally, one of the course co-coordinators has almost 20 years experience as a librarian, and therefore brings professional librarian skills to support the development of the course materials within COR109 and ensures full integration of library support staff and systems into the course through regular liaison.

Strategy 6: COR109 integrates careers support and staff into the curriculum by inviting Careers Support staff to attend at least one lecture per semester, making manifest how work-readiness graduate attributes are developed within the course and discussing the assistance Careers Support can offer students in identifying career goals and opportunities. The rationale for integrating careers advice and support, and imbedding graduate attributes into a first-year foundational course such as COR109, is based on research by Lizzio and Wilson (2010). They identified that without a sense of purpose students often fail to develop the necessary persistence required to overcome academic difficulty or failure, and specifically note that ‘A sense of purpose or fit is fundamentally a *subjective and experiential process*. For example, it doesn’t matter that objectively a degree will eventually deliver the vocational outcomes that a student may desire, if they don’t think or feel that it will right now, because they are less likely to stay to find out later’ (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010, pp. 3-4).

As Ecclestone (2009) points out, university study is a time of preparation for ‘becoming somebody’, and this is also recognised by a major assessment item in COR109 in which students have to research interpersonal communication skills and analyse the benefits of the application of these skills in their particular discipline or field.

Strategy 7: COR109 also incorporates study skills diagnostics into the course curriculum. Within the course, students are given the opportunity to take an online diagnostic test – as part of an assessment item - based on academic skills of writing (grammar, sentence construction, formal writing conventions). If students fail to identify or create correct responses to test questions they are directed to specific study skill support resources, workshops and consultations. This diagnostic is delivered in week two to offer students early access to study skill support.

As a follow up, within the week four tutorial, prior to a major piece of written assessment, students are asked to write a paragraph on a given topic. The paragraphs are also used as a diagnostic tool of academic writing skill and are assessed in terms of spelling, grammar and sentence construction, use of academic voice and paragraph structure. Students who fail the task are referred to work with academic skills support advisers.

Finally, specific study skills support workshops are designed and facilitated by study skills professionals to correspond with COR109 assessment tasks in a ‘just in time’ schedule. For example, if COR109 students are required to submit an argumentative essay in week nine, study skills workshops on writing essays are offered within weeks seven and eight. This particular integration of study skills support is based on research by Shah et al. (2011) that there is an increased number of students enrolled into universities who may be unprepared for tertiary education.

COURSE MANAGEMENT: LOCATIONS, ENROLMENT, TIMETABLING AND SPACE REQUIREMENTS

COR109 was conducted over the 13 teaching weeks of the semester across three campuses. To ensure a quality experience for all students, tutorial classes were capped at 20 students meaning that 142 weekly tutorials had to be scheduled into the USC timetable. Further, in order to allocate all students a seat in the scheduled lectures and account for three campus locations, 17 lectures per week needed to be scheduled (lecturers were also recorded for online viewing). The logistics involved with these numbers caused enormous challenges for

the automated online enrolment system employed at USC, as well as for the course coordinators and their team in organising the many staff members required to teach numerous classes, along with the space required to accommodate a massive on-campus course every week.

Locations and student numbers

In its inaugural semester, the COR109 teaching schedule was spread across several of the university's campuses. Projecting student numbers at different campuses proved difficult and some buffers were required. USC enrolments are increasing and the original enrolment projection for the course was 2,200 students, which increased to 2,600 students in late 2013; the final timetable had the potential to accommodate 3,000 students if the cap of 20 students per class was raised to 22 students. As the main campus, 144 tutorials were scheduled at the Sippy Downs campus. However, some of these were left closed and only opened to enrolment as needed. The final result was 135 tutorials at this location.

Gympie and Noosa campuses were more problematic. Four classes scheduled for the Gympie campus were reduced to three because the projection that the new Gympie campus (completed in 2013) would absorb enrolment from the Noosa area did not occur. Consequently, the two tutorials scheduled for Noosa Junction were filled and a further two classes were subsequently scheduled and filled.

Timetabling, enrolment and staffing requirements

Enrolment, timetabling and staffing are significant challenges in the delivery of a massive on-campus course. First-year, first-semester students in particular are navigating unfamiliar terrain. Table 1 outlines the tutorial schedule for the typical teaching week in COR109 and shows the number of concurrent tutorials within a single time slot, which led to some difficulty in the enrolment process and scheduling of teaching staff.

Table 1. COR109 tutorial weekly schedule

Day	Number of concurrent tutorials for each two-hour tutorial time slot									
	8-10	9-11	10-12	12-2	2-4	3-5	4-6	5-7	6-8	7-9
Monday	-	-	-	7	7	-	7	-	-	7
Tuesday	7	-	-	7	1	1	8	-	7	-
Wednesday	4	1	4	5	4	-	-	-	-	7
Thursday	-	7	-	7	2	-	3	-	7	-
Friday	7	-	4	4	4	-	-	7	-	-
Saturday	-	-	3	3	-	-	-	-	-	-

When developing the COR109 timetable, factors such as on-campus parking, appropriate teaching spaces, and the schedules of all other courses had to be taken into account. The COR109 committee made the decision that running concurrent tutorials in the same timeslots, even though it would face challenges, would result in easier enrolment and staffing processes.

Upon reflection the enrolment process, though not perfect, was relatively smooth. However, the staffing aspect of the timetable proved to be time consuming and resulted in over-staffing, which in turn required further management. When it came to enrolment and staffing there were two main issues: how to enrol 2,415 new students into 142 tutorials without confusing them, and the additional staffing required to schedule concurrent tutorials.

COURSE MANAGEMENT: STUDENT ENROLMENT PROCESS

The logistical challenge of enrolling 2,415 students into 142 tutorials was addressed well in advance of the semester's beginning. USC has an online enrolment process where students would normally log-in to 'USC Central' through the university website and enrol themselves in a course by selecting a lecture and tutorial number. The initial problem for COR109 was the capacity for USC Central to function correctly with so many scheduled tutorials, and secondly the student confusion that may result from so many enrolment options.

This problem was addressed through providing a single 'shell' per timeslot for students to enrol in. For example, if a student wanted to enrol in the Monday 7.00 pm – 9.00 pm timeslot there would be one tutorial code for this timeslot. Within this shell there would be 140 places (7 tutorials x 20 students = 140 places) and as soon as the places were filled the shell would become unavailable for further enrolment in the same way that a full class would become unavailable for any other course.

The next step in this process was to divide students within these shells into classes of 20 and allocate a room to each of the separate tutorials. This was done in orientation week and students were notified through email, an announcement on Blackboard, and an updated student schedule through USC Central. This simplified the process, according to informal student feedback, and was not confusing.

COURSE MANAGEMENT: STAFFING PROCESS

The initial idea for scheduling up to seven tutorials in a single timeslot was based on previous successful experience with scheduling concurrent tutorial within a large first-year course. The intention was to have seven tutors teaching the concurrent two-hour tutorials in four- or six-hour blocks. The benefits of this timetabling strategy were two-fold: in limiting the number of staff employed this would provide our sessional staff with a greater (and reasonable) amount of work hours, while also limiting the staffing cost overall. This is because the sessional pay rate for the first tutorial is \$116.07 and for repeat tutorials is \$77.38, therefore the cost for every extra sessional staff member employed, (extra first tutorial every week amounting to \$1,005.94/staff member) would have been quite significant over the semester.

One issue that was not anticipated during planning was the inability to always have access to seven tutorial rooms in concurrent time slots. Significant gaps between time slots were left where rooms were not available (Table 2 provides an example).

Table 2. COR109 staff scheduling example – Fridays

Concurrent tutorial	8-10	10-12	12-2	2-4	6-8
Tutorial 1	Tutor 1	Tutor 1	Tutor 1	Tutor 8	Tutor 8
Tutorial 2	Tutor 2	Tutor 2	Tutor 2	Tutor 9	Tutor 9
Tutorial 3	Tutor 3	Tutor 3	Tutor 3	Tutor 10	Tutor 10
Tutorial 4	Tutor 4	Tutor 4	Tutor 4	Tutor 11	Tutor 11
Tutorial 5	Tutor 5				Tutor 12
Tutorial 6	Tutor 6				Tutor 13
Tutorial 7	Tutor 7				Tutor 14

Sessional staff were generally unwilling to agree to such a large gap between their teaching commitments, and so this required three extra teaching staff to cover either the early or late

time slots. In this example, had the extra three late tutorials been offered in the 10.00 am – 12.00 pm slot, the schedule would have required three less staff for the day and provided better blocking of hours for the sessional staff involved.

In addition, on Mondays there was a crossover of seven concurrent tutorials in each of the 4.00 pm – 6.00 pm and 7.00 pm – 9.00 pm timeslots. This required 14 teaching staff on campus during this five-hour period, which made it extremely difficult to block these hours with other classes, resulting in up to seven tutors having to travel to campus to teach a single tutorial.

COURSE MANAGEMENT: COMMUNICATION STRUCTURE AND STAFF SUPPORT

COR109 is situated within the School of Communication, in the Faculty of Arts and Business, at USC, the coordinator and two co-coordinators supported by four associate lecturers in communication. In addition to the core team of on-going academics, COR109 is supported by 39 sessional teaching staff, 15 marking staff and a part time administrative assistant. The communication and management structure of COR109 was modelled before the semester began to ensure effective decision-making and controlled communication (Figure 1).

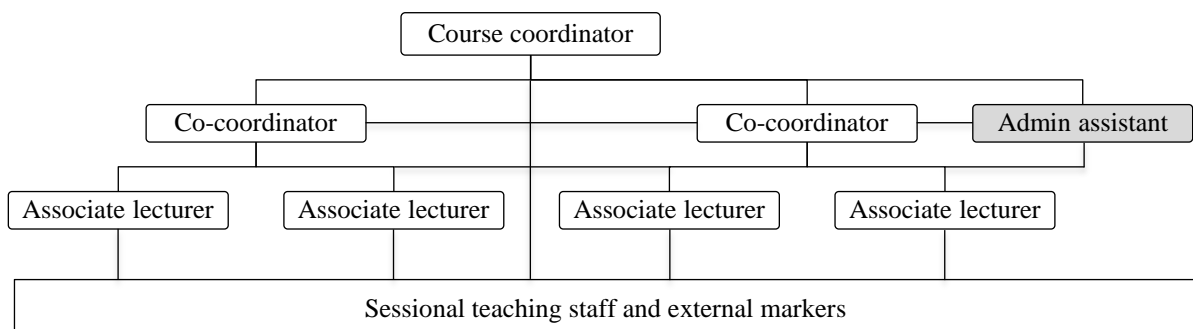


Figure 1. COR109 communication and management structure

Given the large number of sessional staff and that many of them were teaching the course for the first time, the course coordinator, co-coordinators and associate lecturers were each responsible for communication with, and supervision of, a small team of sessional staff (6-10 each). Further, due to the large teaching load of the associate lecturers (eight tutorials), they were not able to mark all of their students’ assessment items, and therefore they also supervised and moderated the work of external markers who took on the marking load of these classes.

Staff support

As COR109 engages transition pedagogy to all aspects of the curriculum, it provides support to teaching staff within on-going and embedded professional development. Indeed, the professional development and commitment to the support offered to casual academics has a symbiotic relationship to the support offered to students; integrating ‘casual’ staff into academic departments is a strong predictor of commitment to students (Pisani & Stott, 1998).

Thus, if we want first-year students to be nurtured and supported through their transition to university, then sessional staff that support students need nurturing as well.

The embedded nature of the in-situ, semester-long professional development offered to sessional teaching staff

Given that sessional staff are at the coalface of the student learning experience, with 80 per cent of undergraduate teaching undertaken by sessional staff (Percy et al., 2008), it is this group that requires most support in engaging students with their holistic transition. Yet over twenty years of research into how sessional staff feel about their integration into academia and professional development/support creates a sustained narrative of feelings of marginalisation, lack of professional development and growing discontent (Junor, 2004; Ryan et al., 2013). As a result of this narrative, and the notion that support for sessional staff extends into support for student learning and engagement (Pisani & Stott, 1998), specific measures to integrate and provide professional development support for sessional staff are employed within COR109.

The RED Report (Percy, et al., 2008) commissioned by DEEWR, recommended regular and appropriate academic development opportunities for sessional staff in Australian universities. However, in 2013 Ryan et al. identified that the majority of sessional staff still feel that they do not receive regular, sufficient or appropriate academic development. Sessional staff perceptions of a lack of appropriate academic development may be in some part due to an over-reliance on generic, centrally organised, short academic development courses designed for both on-going and casual staff.

For example, in a report commissioned by New Zealand's Ministry of Education, Prebble et al. (2004) identified that short training courses are unlikely to lead to significant change in teaching behaviour or student outcomes, as they tend to be most effective when used to disseminate information about institutional policy and practice or to train staff in discrete skills and techniques. Instead of recommending the use of generic short courses, Prebble et al. (2004), who examined 150 research articles on the impact of academic development programmes on students' academic success and programme completion, recommended that the academic work group is usually the most effective context for developing the pedagogical content knowledge required in higher education teaching.

Subsequently, in-situ academic development is identified as a more appropriate and effective 'locus' for academic development, also offering greater opportunity for impacting positively upon teachers' understanding and employment of discipline-specific good teaching practice. It was found, perhaps axiomatically, that the main objective of academic development is to help academic staff become more effective at their jobs. A model of academic development that challenges academics to focus on those jobs is likely to be more effective than one that attempts to separate the two. In addition, academics work within disciplines, or shared systems of organisation, so significant changes of work practices are only likely to take place when an entire work group is committed to the change. Finally, in-situ, discipline-specific academic development that is context-bound is supported by Knight and Trowler (2000) and Ramsden (1998).

Therefore, the transition pedagogy offered to students is extended to sessional teachers in the shape of semester-long, in-situ professional development designed to develop discipline-specific, pedagogic content knowledge and academic self-confidence, and build positive

social capital within the team (Table 3). This practice is specifically designed to boost morale and help to create an environment conducive to learning.

Table 3: Professional development activities offered to sessional staff in COR109

Professional development	Associated pressure point	Description	Benefit
Tutor training session (pre-semester)	General – does not target specific pressure point	Normally a two-hour meeting where course content is overviewed, questions are answered, and goals for the semester are set.	Builds team morale, promotes consistency of teaching, develops academic self-confidence, sets a standard for the semester.
Weekly tutors' meetings (weeks 1-13)	General – depending on the week they can target specific pressure points	Weekly content and teaching practice is discussed. Professional staff are invited to present, including: - academic skills staff (Week 1) - international office staff (Week 2) - student equity staff (Week 3) - career services (Week 4) - disability services (Week 5) - students counsellor (Week 6) - Indigenous services (Week 8).	Builds team morale and promotes consistency of teaching. Provides a greater understanding of the student cohort and educates staff on how to deal with different student situations.
Marking workshops (week 4, week 7 & week 11)	Targets pressure points for specific assessment items: - week 4 (Annotated bibliography) - week 7 (Major written assessment) - week 11 (Group oral presentation)	Assessment items are discussed in great detail and where possible, examples are marked and then an open discussion of marking practice ensues. All members of the teaching team are encouraged to have a voice at these meetings and any good practice is openly shared to improve the process.	Builds team morale and promotes consistency of marking. Improves moderation process. Provides academic self-confidence. Takes shared responsibility for marking in the course.

As professional development is offered on a weekly basis (such as weekly tutors' meeting with staff from different divisions of the university) it is hoped that the benefits will have a knock-on effect for teaching staff and students. Not only is semester-long professional development designed to develop a strong community of practice that can quickly assimilate new staff, ideas, and practices, but as practice inevitably improves, so do the graduate attributes of students.

The cost of offering this professional development to sessional staff was seen as an investment in the long-term prosperity of COR109 and the development of consistent and sustainable teaching practices. The weekly tutors' meeting were voluntary and generally well attended, however the tutor training session and marking workshops were paid at 'other activities' level of \$38.69 (Table 4).

Table 4: Cost/staff member for professional development activities offered in COR109

Activity	Duration	Rate	Cost
Pre-semester training session	3 hours	\$38.69	\$116.07
Marking meeting (week 4)	2 hours	\$38.69	\$77.38
Marking meeting (week 7)	2 hours	\$38.69	\$77.38
Marking meeting (week 11)	2 hours	\$38.69	\$77.38
Totals	9 hours		\$348.21

CONCLUSION

COR109 is a massive on-campus course that faced multiple challenges in its inaugural semester, yet resulted in satisfying outcomes for students and staff alike. The implementation of transition pedagogy into the course has provided USC with a tool to provide a foundational course on an institution-wide scale. Timetabling of classes and staff proved problematic, but issues have been identified in Semester One, 2014 that can now be adjusted in future semesters to make scheduling easier and more cost-effective. In particular, timetabling that exploited concurrent tutorials provided benefits to the working conditions of sessional staff whilst balancing staffing costs. Providing in-situ professional development to sessional staff was found to provide holistic benefits for staff, which could flow on to student learning and engagement. The management and communication structure employed in the course was sufficient in dealing with the inflated number of students and staff, and will be utilised in future semesters as an adequate model. A valuable direction of future research would be to focus on attrition, to see how massive on-campus courses such as COR109, embedded with transition pedagogy, could support student retention. Key considerations for the successful implementation of a massive on-campus course include proper planning, creative logistics, pedagogically sound solutions and curriculum-integrated support for both students and staff.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Greg Nash, Janet Turley, Mary-Rose Adkins, Lee-anne Bye, Ann Robertson, Richard Bond and Florin Oprescu are colleagues in the School of Communication, Faculty of Arts and Business at the University of the Sunshine Coast involved in presenting and administering Communication and Thought (COR109). Greg Nash and Gail Crimmins won the Good Practice BLASST award in 2013, a national award from the National Office of Learning and Teaching for boosting the expertise of benchmarking leadership and advancement of standards for sessional teaching.

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