Managing a MOCC: Key Considerations for a Successful Massive On-Campus Course

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MANAGING A MOCC. KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR A SUCCESSFUL MASSIVE ON-CAMPUS COURSE

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, Communication and Thought (COR109) became the first mandatory course for all students in first semester of study at the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC). This paper builds on the ‘Rise of a MOCC: Massive On-Campus Course’ paper presented at the 2014 TEM conference, and reflects upon the lessons learned from design and logistical challenges on one of Australia’s largest university courses. Firstly, this paper discusses the strengths and weaknesses of specific assessment items: how they evolved through feedback from students and staff, and how they were developed to scaffold for academic success, to be relevant to every discipline and to promote graduate attributes. Secondly, statistical data on student attainment and attendance is provided, alongside student feedback related to identified strengths and weaknesses of COR109 content and delivery. This analysis includes a discussion on a high Fail Absent (FA) rate and provides examples of how attendance impacted final grade attainment.

KEY WORDS
management, leadership, large course/unit, assessment design, course design.

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides reflections on one year of co-ordinating COR109 at the University of the Sunshine Coast, a Massive On-Campus Course (MOCC) which provides face-to-face lectures and tutorials on four campus sites. It is a mandatory course for all undergraduate students in their first semester of their first year of study, and is aimed at providing students from all disciplines with essential skills and resources for ‘success within the academy’ while promoting a ‘sense of belonging’. In first semester of 2014, the course content was designed by the COR109 management team as directed by a university reference group formed to oversee the implementation of the course.

The reflections presented in this paper are based on an ‘empowerment evaluation’ (Fetterman, 2001; Fetterman et al., 1996) of the course. An empowerment evaluation requires the reviewer to clarify the course’s main mission, investigate the values and principles of the course, and, in response to reflection, plan for the future (Fetterman, 2001). Crucially, empowerment evaluations are undertaken by the practitioner (Dewey,

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1929). In this instance, the practitioners are the course coordination team and teaching staff. The practitioners/teaching staff carries out the curriculum evaluation as part of an ‘internal professional mandate’, in contrast to external drivers (McKernan, 2007). The methodology for the reflection and re-design of curriculum are congruent with the principles of action research, a method of investigation by practitioners that looks for practical solutions to identified problems or limitations (Elliot, 1991; McKernan, 1996). Action research aligns with empowerment evaluation as both are participative and involve a cyclical, reflective process. In addition, action research responds to the emerging needs of the course and aims to refine earlier cycles (Dick, 2000).

Iterative reflections on the course delivery over two semesters have resulted in considerable changes to the course content, resources and assessment. The changes were predominantly made in response to the teaching team’s and students’ lived experience of engaging in the course, and informed by the main mission of the course: to engage first semester, first year students in the culture and processes of academia including research, critical thinking and communication. In particular, the teaching team’s empowerment evaluation identified a need for clearer scaffolding of assessment items, in order to provide feedforward opportunities to students and enhance their likelihood of success in subsequent assessment requirements within COR109 and concurrent or future units of study; it also sought to make the assessments more explicitly relevant to students by strengthening the links to their discipline and the graduate attributes sought by future employers.

Reflection has also identified student attainment and attendance to be interdependent. This paper discusses this as a key factor that is likely to inform the next iteration of curriculum re-design. To motivate and maintain attendance, the students are also encouraged to engage with or personally referred to further support provided by Academic Skills, Student Services, the Library, the Student Guild, International Student Services and Careers Connection. Tutors are empowered to address student issues that may impact on attendance or attainment and provided with information sessions from the course team and support service staff about how they can facilitate student access to these support services. Specific skills classes aligned with COR109 assessments have been developed by academic skills advisors and the library, and weekly promotion of these classes are embedded in the tutorial content. Next, the teaching and assessment design are discussed.

TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT DESIGN

In Semester 1 2014, course assessment tasks were implemented as advised by the COR109 reference group that was formed in 2013 to oversee the development and implementation of the first compulsory course to be undertaken by all first year students in their first semester of study. The reference group consists of representatives from all discipline areas, the Pro-Vice Chancellor (Students), the Director of the Office of Learning and Teaching, the Director of Student Life and Learning, the Associate Deans of Learning and Teaching and a representative from timetabling. The reference group proposed a whole of institution approach to designing and reflecting on the design and implementation of a COR course, heeding Krause’s claim that ‘coherent and holistic approaches to planning, delivering and reviewing the first year curriculum are foundational to success in the first year’ (2006, p. 3). Furthermore, in order to ensure
that the values espoused in university policies are operationalised in the day-to-day delivery of the curriculum, an institution-wide ownership of effective curriculum design is required for first year courses and programs so that they reflect a central core of agreed values (Krause, 2006).

Consequently, in alignment with USC’s core values, the course’s assessment design, course content and delivery have been informed by transition pedagogy (Nash et.al., 2013), a focus on ‘student learning’ (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005) and enabling students to view their undergraduate degree as a process or journey of ‘becoming somebody’ (Ecclestone, 2009) by achieving certain graduate attributes. A focus on graduate attributes helps both the students and teachers view specific course units as only part of a whole degree programme and how the course unit will contribute to the whole learning journey or process.

Bowden et al. (2000) suggest that these attributes need to be interpreted and elaborated within specific disciplines for practical meaning to develop. The Week 1 lecture provides students with information about the University of the Sunshine Coast’s (USC) graduate attributes, explicitly linking them to the introductory level skills and qualities they will acquire upon completion of this course; this is reinforced in the course outline where graduate attributes are linked to assessment. Furthermore, each week a brief video is prepared for students which outlined what information is covered in readings, lectures and tutorials and how each linked, not only to grade outcomes, but also to graduate attributes and the skills required in their own discipline. Therefore, transition pedagogy and a focus on embedding graduate attributes were central considerations in the empowerment evaluation detailed below.

The COR109 management team is also committed to respond to student and tutor feedback about the course and revises assessment, content and teaching strategies each semester. This assuages Bath et al.’s (2004, p. 325) warning against being content with ‘static snapshots’ of curriculum and is congruent with processes of review and renewal that create a ‘living and validated curriculum’ for teachers and students. Assessment is recognised as having a profound effect on student behavior (Entwistle, 1991), exerting even more influence on what a student does than teaching (Boud, 2012); therefore, changes in assessment tasks, constructively aligned with learning outcomes and teaching and learning activities (Biggs & Tang, 2007), were redesigned to foster student learning and enhance academic confidence.

In 2013, assessment task one was an Annotated Bibliography worth twenty percent of the total mark. The goal of the task was to enhance the skills of researching, referencing, academic writing skills and critical reflection. However, at the end of semester one, in consideration of the feedback from both students and staff it was decided to change the first assessment item to provide more specific scaffolding for task two (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Task one was then divided onto two sections: a) an online quiz which requires knowledge of research preparation, paraphrasing, referencing, and academic writing (worth five percent of the total mark; and b) writing a paragraph or a report section which requires demonstration of the ability to locate specific academic sources, apply the appropriate structure, format, writing conventions, paraphrasing and referencing (worth fifteen percent of the total mark). Students can choose to use the genre and referencing style that they would most likely be asked to submit within their discipline area; however, in tutorials they are exposed to learning about both essays and reports.
as it is very likely they could be required to use both. After consultation with programme leaders, a document listing all discipline areas with the genre and referencing style mostly required by each discipline is provided to students to reinforce that their learning in COR109 will equip them with relevant skills for learning within their discipline. The topic of assessment task 1b is focused on interpersonal communication skills in the workplace as this was found to be an important graduate attribute required by employers and provides relevance for student learning. Tutorials were redesigned to teach formal writing conventions, specific structural requirements of both genres, using evidence from academic sources and the importance of referencing. When assessing task 1b, tutors are required to provide extensive feedback with the aim of enabling students to improve their performance in task 2, for which task 1b is an explicit scaffold in both generic and content requirements. Students are required to engage with this written feedback and are offered further individual face-to-face feedback to clarify understanding and strategise their approach to task two.

Assessment task two has remained as an Argumentative Essay or Analytical Report worth forty percent of the total mark. There are two main goals of this task. The first goal is to continue to enhance student’s academic writing skills, focussing upon the format and structure of typical written assessment types that they will encounter in academic and professional settings. Students could again choose to use the genre and referencing style that they would most likely be asked to submit within their discipline. It requires students to choose a communication topic and discuss three skills within that topic that benefit their specific discipline. The change from semester one to semester two was to limit the communication topic to interpersonal communication and to specify the three skills, which research supports as graduate attributes which are highly valued by employers (Velasco, 2012). Secondly, the link to students’ disciplines is an important curriculum design element as students need to both ‘come to terms with what it is to learn and succeed in higher education, but they also need to learn the new language and conventions of their disciplinary study’ (Krause, 2006), a challenge often overlooked when assessment tasks are decontextualised.

Assessment task three is a Group Oral Presentation worth forty percent of the total mark. The goal of this task is to enhance students’ knowledge of and skills in a) group development, group communication and conflict management; and b) public speaking, persuasive speaking, speech development and the presentation of visual information. Changes made to task three include a change in choice of topics, a change in format and the method of reflecting on their group work skills in relation to the graduate attribute of communication and collaboration. The format changed from a TED style presentation to a persuasive presentation where students are required to select a topic from a choice of four topics and work collaboratively to take a stance on that topic and provide premises to support their group argument. The move from one set topic for the whole cohort to a choice of one topic from four enables students to choose an area of specific interest that is aligned with USC’s core values. For example, one topic focuses on the value of indigenous knowledge; even if students do not personally engage with this topic, they will hear the presentations of those who have and develop their understanding of indigenous knowledge and perspectives which the university is currently in process to embed across the whole of university curriculum. The incorporation of various topics has also enabled the course to engage further with academics across the university; USC academics with expertise in these areas have provided academic resources and guest lecture videos to assist students in developing
their understanding of the content from within a framework of discipline knowledge and professional identity.

When students have completed their presentation they are required to complete a ‘Group processes self-assessment tool’ individually and confidentially in class before leaving. In tutorials, students are informed clearly about the graduate attributes assessed in task three by explicitly linking them with the set task. Students have been provided with an opportunity to use a workbook provided on ‘Pebble Pad’, an online e-portfolio, to reflect on their group processes, adoption of group roles and graduate attributes. The inclusion and emphasis placed on student reflection in action and on action (Schon, 1983) in their group work approaches is designed to help students to diagnose their core strengths and areas for development and facilitate a questioning approach to their learning and facilitate student self-regulation (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The reflections can assist student to complete their group processes self-assessment tool and assist them to see their acquisition of graduate attributes in context.

ATTENDANCE AND ATTAINMENT

Along with a change in assessment was a focus on showing students the importance of attendance and engagement with course materials, aiming to establish the expectation that students would be proactive in engaging with course materials Setting this expectation for attendance and engagement was important as previous research has demonstrated a link between attendance and grades (Corbin et al., 2010). The first lecture of each week is recorded and made available to students for viewing online as part of the USC blended learning strategy. However, in keeping with the COR109 mandate as a face-to-face on-campus course, all students are enrolled in a face to face lecture as well. Attendance at tutorials is seen as vital so students can develop a ‘sense of belonging’ and ‘self-efficacy’ in an environment of trust within the classroom (Pompper, 2006). Tutorials are structured as two-hour workshops providing activities that are designed to show students ‘how to’ complete assessment tasks and promotion of information about where they can access extra resources online and help from university wide professional support services including academic skills, library services, student administration and counselling (Szekeres, 2013). A recording is made of one tutorial each week but is made available to students only in special circumstances, such as in the case of scheduled tutorials on public holidays or other special needs requests. Attendance at tutorials was viewed as essential for success in COR109.

In order to establish the expectation of regular tutorial attendance and engagement, tutorial attendance was specifically recorded in class each week, even though there were no marks allocated for class attendance. The attendance data below (Table 1 and Figure 1) is from 1,571 out of 2,265 enrolled students enrolled in semester one, 2015 (note: classes were analysed only where it was confirmed that correct attendance data had been entered each week).

The data available demonstrates that, generally, higher attendance was necessary to receive higher grades. For instance, almost all of the students scoring an HD attended for nine or more of the eleven recorded tutorials, with over half attending for all eleven tutorials. Similarly, almost 70 per cent of students who scored a DN had attended nine
tutorials and 90 per cent had attended for seven or more of the eleven tutorials. There were clearly a higher number of fails from lower attenders (137 of the 212 failing students attended five tutorials or less), although fails were recorded right along the spectrum. Of the 75 failing students who attended most of the semester, 65 did not submit at least one or piece of assessment and 10 failed with full submission but inadequate overall grade.

Table 1. Attendance and grades per number of tutorials attended

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Nil</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
<th>11</th>
<th>Total</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FL</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>PS</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>53</td>
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<td>43</td>
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<td>389</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CR</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>97</td>
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<tr>
<td>DN</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>88</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>199</td>
<td>237</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>288</td>
<td>1552</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Grade data by attendance
One of the most significant findings of this analysis was that there seemed to be a critical minimum attendance rate which had a large influence on the difference in grades. It seemed that attending for at least five of the eleven tutorials was an important factor in success, with students attending that number of tutorials far more likely to achieve a higher grade compared to those who attended less. In cases of attendance at four or less tutorials, the most common grade was fail (over 50 per cent of this group failed). Some low attending students did pass the course (28 per cent) but only a very minor number reached higher grades with this attendance pattern. Students who only attended once or twice during semester usually did so in the first three weeks of semester. This pattern matches a pattern of student attendance as identified by Sawon et al. (2012). Conversely, where students attended five or more of the eleven tutorials, the majority (93 per cent) passed with only 7 per cent fails. The pass rate was 25 per cent and many scored much higher with 33 per cent CR, 28 per cent DN and 25 per cent HD. This comparison is even more obvious when only comparing pass and fail rates for the two groups (see Figure 2).

![Comparison of Pass Rates by Tutorial Attendance](image)

**Figure 2. Comparison of pass rates by tutorial attendance**

We revised and used the course assessment to provide better scaffolding, a clearer link to various disciplines, and a focus on graduate attributes, along with communicating a clearer expectations of attendance in order to support academic success, increased sense of belonging through connection to discipline and improved graduate attributes. From an institutional perspective, the COR109 reference group became a whole-of-institution first-year reference group. This will provide the COR109 management team with the opportunity to gain a greater understanding of what students are experiencing in other courses, and just as importantly, allow other first-year coordinators to have better access to the content and resources in COR109 to create much stronger transitions for future students.

The next phase of re-design is currently focused in these areas:

- Developing of a contracted textbook (John Wiley & Sons) on approaches to university assessments that will encompass assessment types currently
addressed in COR109, as well as including those that are not in order to further scaffold and promote academic success? 

- Early discussions are taking place that will lead to the possible expansion of assessment types currently offered in the course. The likely focus here will be the inclusion of a scientific report as it has been identified as a significant gap in the current content in order to further connect students to their discipline requirements.
- Expanding to offer more assessment types will bring about discussions on the potential of streaming students during the last third of the semester into classes that will focus on particular assessment items (essay, business report, scientific report).
- There is very early discussion on the possibility of addressing numeracy through an assessment item.
- Addressing attendance through engagement/early intervention strategies – phone calls and follow up.

**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES**

Mary-Rose Adkins, Gail Crimmins, Gregory Nash, Lee-anne Bye, Florin Oprescu, Ann Robertson, Richard Bond and Janet Turley 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). Nash and 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.

**REFERENCES**


