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Time on task in intensive modes of delivery

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This paper reports on an investigation into how staff teaching in compressed courses can encourage student engagement and enhance student use of learning time, despite significant restraints of time as well as distance. Typically these courses (described here as units) are expected to have comparable learning outcomes to their full-semester counterparts and provide an opportunity for students to either retake failed units or to acquire credit for their chosen degrees in accelerated time. Organising teaching and learning through intensive modes of delivery may require different approaches to curriculum development and pedagogy compared to traditional unit planning and delivery, especially when the intensive delivery utilises online technologies. This paper explores strategies employed by successful intensive mode teachers in the development and delivery units for maximised student engagement. It concludes that many of these strategies are equally applicable in online and distance education regardless of the unit being intensive or otherwise.

Keywords: distance education; online technologies; student engagement; student learning time; teacher strategies; time management

Introduction

Intensive mode of delivery (IMD) is a pedagogical design that originated from the need to give students who had failed a unit (a course of credit-bearing study and assessment) the opportunity to catch up. It also enables students to fast-track their degrees or reduce their workload for a subsequent study period (Ellis & Sawyer, 2009, p. 35). Typically these units are run over a shorter time frame than their traditional counterparts, even if the expected learning outcomes and credit are identical to those of the longer unit. Macquarie University (Sydney, Australia) operated until recently two 15-week semesters (called sessions 1 and 2) providing the teaching for its degree units and also a summer school, wherein short units would be offered for recreational or more formal study. Partially prompted by students wishing to re-take units they had failed, and observing that some students were enrolling in summer school units as a way of gaining accelerated credit, the university sought to reconceptualise summer school as session 3, and to encourage academics across the university to provide IMD offerings of units corresponding to those in sessions 1 and 2. Session 3 units run over five weeks of study and one week of exams. Students may take no more than two session 3 units at a time. In acknowledgement of the growth

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of session 3, some support for teachers developing units was offered through the offices of the authors. This paper reports findings of interviews with colleagues teaching using IMD in session 3 who have embraced online and at-a-distance pedagogies as a way of managing IMD. The investigation was undertaken in order to research and identify the factors that were related to the success of teachers who were highly regarded for the units they delivered in intensive mode. The interviews reveal evidence of strategies that are also effective for distance units offered in more conventional time frames.

Simply delivering the same content in a shorter time will not ensure achievement of learning outcomes. The literature shows that there are strengths and weaknesses in intensive mode delivery for both lecturers and students. Strengths include better concentration by students, time efficiency and flexibility (Ellis & Sawyer, 2009), as well as greater opportunities for collaborative learning and interactivity (Allen, Miller, Fisher, & Moriarty, 1982; Ellis & Sawyer, 2009; Finger & Penney, 2001; Scott & Conrad, 1992). Weaknesses stem from the time pressures which are inherent in the shortened period available for study. They include the potential for information overload if the content is not pedagogically structured, or adapted, in such a way that it sustains and enhances learning outcomes, or if the hours are too long, leading to student and/or lecturer exhaustion (Dean, 2006). These factors may lead to high student attrition rates in intensive mode units, as well as reluctance from academic staff to continue teaching in intensive mode format in subsequent semesters (Dean, 2006).

The problem of time management may be exacerbated by the use of online classes, because, in such classes, students have choice about when to study (Nehme, 2010). If lecturers do not attempt to create circumstances that influence and motivate, students may find it difficult to study or may fail (Lustbader, 2010, cited in Nehme, 2010). Specific teaching strategies in planning, delivery and assessment are therefore needed to counter the problems of time and distance and encourage effective student learning. Effective time use by students and support by staff in providing structure and distinct learning opportunities is critical for student learning. Teachers who are experienced in teaching in a distance mode use, and can identify, strategies in unit design, learning tasks and support which engage students and enable them to learn effectively at a distance and in time-restricted environments. Providing sequencing and structure that encourages students to maximise their study efficacy and engagement is desirable in all modes of study but is, perhaps, most critical when study is in an IMD unit and at a distance. This paper reports on an investigation into how staff teaching IMD units can encourage student engagement and enhance student use of learning time.

Methodology

The units (credit-bearing units of study) were offered in distance mode by a large, research-based, metropolitan Australian university. The university is strongly committed to e-learning and requires an online presence for all its units of study, whether offered purely online, in traditional internal on-campus mode, or a mix of the two (blended learning). The units reported on in this paper were all regular undergraduate units offered for study by distance and intensive modes into the 6-week period known as session 3 over the summer. In some cases the units were adapted from on-campus offerings; others had been developed from the beginning to be delivered in

distance mode. Some were units in which all the students enrolled were physically in countries other than that of the university. The university required the learning outcomes for the unit to remain the same as for traditional offerings although the teaching and learning activities, including assessment, through which the learning outcomes are achieved, might change. Principles of coherence and constructive alignment (Biggs & Tang, 2007) were used to ensure that the learning outcomes were achieved in the shortened period.

Following the tradition of the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) the researchers interviewed subject expert teachers, analysed verbatim transcriptions and identified emergent themes. These themes are described, along with illustrative quotations in the section on strategies below. The seven units of study were taught by five teachers, identified as experts in their teaching practice and recognised for excellence in the delivery of intensive distance units. They were responsible for the coordination and delivery of the courses. All were highly recommended as subject experts who were also acknowledged for their pedagogical expertise, and the units they coordinated were highly regarded by staff and students, as shown by the regular student evaluations. As well as being subject experts in their own areas, they were passionate about sharing their knowledge with students. The five teachers included senior academics who had been recognised with national teaching awards but also an early career sessional teacher still seeking a permanent position. They were responsible for units in ancient and modern history, general arts courses and business units. Those who taught the business management and marketing units ran their own businesses but had, in addition, taught part-time for a number of years and were committed to continuing to do so.

Once a semi-structured interview schedule had been developed and ethics approval had been obtained, the teachers were questioned about their teaching of intensive units of study offered in distance mode. There was a range of questions which covered:

- the unit, and whether the teacher had taught it before in a different mode;
- whether they had assistance in preparing to teach it and how it fitted in their workload;
- the type of unit and its objectives and its suitability for intensive mode delivery;
- how the unit was structured;
- the types of learning and teaching activities including the use of online resources;
- the most effective activities for engaging students;
- how assessment was structured;
- profile questions about teaching background;
- rating the experience for students;
- rating the experience for them as a teacher.

The interviewees responded, in taped interviews of 1–2 h, to the question prompts, speaking freely and reflectively about their backgrounds and their teaching experiences. They drew on their experiences of designing their units, expanding on the structure of these and their teaching practices, including the timing of activities and assessments. Continuous improvement marked their approaches as they constantly reflected on what had worked well for the students and what might be done

differently. They were all very aware of student needs and made considerable efforts to ensure student engagement. Enthusiasm, reflection and commitment marked them all as exceptional teachers.

Strategies

The key themes that emerged from analysis of the interviews suggest that the strategies most critical in providing the best possible learning experience for IMD distance students were design; encouraging commitment; motivation; sequencing of assessment; technology; and communication. The themes are discussed in turn below.

Design

All of the interviewees regarded clear planning and design as critical, where design is conceptualised as the provision of a flexible unit structure meeting the needs of a diversity of the students. A number of considerations in relation to access and motivation, including knowing the audience (the students) in order to be able to detect their needs, were described. The teachers' awareness of what it was like for the students to study at distance permeated their decisions about the design of the units of study. They had considered what it was like for the students to study over the summer at a time when they were also working or had family commitments and were studying while others were on holiday. Their design strategies demonstrated awareness of the nature and diversity of the cohort, and the students' needs, particularly for flexibility in time use.

Anna¹ explained how modularisation enables the students to undertake aspects of the unit when they able to, while still maintaining the principles of constructive alignment in the unit. The timing becomes malleable without the quality of the learning experience being sacrificed:

The way that this unit was designed, was to be flexible so you know, if you're on a battleship in the army and you need, and you want to do your 135 hours in 3 weeks or however long you want to fit it into, it can be studied in that way so it's modularised ... we still use those key principles of what are the learning outcomes, what are the activities in which the students need to engage to achieve those learning outcomes, and how are we going to access, and make a decision about how well they've achieved those learning outcomes. So that kind of underpinning, that kind foundation, the spine, I would call it, of the unit is pretty much there. It's just a question of organising it to meet the different time demands and availabilities that those students have wherever they're located, whether they're here in Sydney or they're in the Philippines, or as I said on a battle ship somewhere.

Steve also advises ensuring that when designing a unit to:

keep it simple and be very clear about the points or milestones that you want to achieve so that they go down a road, and they can see the beginning, the middle and an end. And be clear at the beginning, what the end is going to be, what's the outcome.

Max arranges the timing of his live online classes to suit the students. He ensures that the students know that he opens up the website a week before the official start; that he provides live online classes and that he negotiates the times of these with the

students. This applies whenever he is teaching online, whether in a regular unit (semesters 1 or 2) or a condensed unit (semester 3).

It's important with all these units, to open up a week before. Number 1, you've got to get them running a week before so they can browse [the class resources on the university learning management system]. In fact, I email our unit outline at that time too so they've got that, they understand what that course is. And within that outline, it says there are live classrooms. In the first week, what I do is, in fact, it's usually the first day, I give them 3 choices, lunchtime, night time, or even weekend, when's the most appropriate for everyone. So I try to put a consensus view when people want the class, particularly in semester 1 and semester 2 where most of the students at [the university] at postgraduate level, are international, and are from China, Indonesia, Vietnam, and so you've got 95% international, they're fairly young, and so they've got other units they're doing. So, it's a bit trickier; you don't want it so it clashes. For example, this semester I just finished, we had one class from 12 to 2, and that was on a Tuesday, and we also had a class on Thursday night from 6 to 8, which they can go to as well. In [another semester], it was agreed when I had 60 people, the best time to do it was a Sunday afternoon, so I actually did my course, the live interaction from 4 o'clock to 6 o'clock on a Sunday afternoon. It was fine with me.

In addition, Max caters for students whose timing is different by providing recordings for those who want to listen later.

In planning the unit, Bryce keeps in mind the time the students have available. He explains that the original unit, from which his was adapted, had a dense, large textbook. It was not appropriate to use that for the condensed unit so he had to rethink how much reading material was appropriate given the subject matter: "I used a variety of different readings rather than from the existing textbook, just to give the students a bit more of an overview of each topic so that it would be accessible for them". He used existing lecture recordings and edited them down, keeping what was essential so that each lecture was shorter. Students were listening to three 30-min lectures every week, instead of 55-min lectures. He was aware of the differences in the amount of time the students would have.

It depends on the individual student; some people have all the time in the world to listen to sessions' worth of lectures in one go, sure, but other students can't, so I don't know what the answer is to that. But the way that I'm used to teaching undergraduates is sequential week by week; it's just the way I did it. It's easier for me I guess especially with the discussion forums, and the workshop peer review tool, because they were base tools so they had to be, in a sense, had to be done week by week to make them available at the beginning of the week because if you listen to all the lectures in week 1 and it's week 6, and you're contributing to the discussion forum and it's been ages since you've listened to lectures and done the readings, I don't think it has the same impact.

Encouraging commitment

The interviewees were aware of the importance of early commitment and engagement of the students. Because of the short time for learning, any student who falls behind can easily be discouraged and drop out. Most of the teachers interviewed opened a web page before the start of the unit, emailed students to encourage them to log on and provided short welcomes, sometimes in the form of a video in which they introduced themselves and what would be studied. Students took advantage of this and logged on early, thus demonstrating that lecturers can encourage motivation

in their students by creating circumstances that “influence and compel” students to study and be engaged in class (Nehme, 2010, p. 227).

Having a prepared email for students who ask about the unit before it commences provides certainty for them and saves time for the teacher. Richard’s experience shows in his techniques for dealing with early enquiries: “I try to encourage students, ‘Do contact me if you’ve got questions’”. Students email him to ask:

“What’s your expectations?” and “I’ve never done Ancient History before and what do I need to know about this? And can you help me?” So I’ve got a stock email that’s basically already written and just cut and paste the response which tells them this is what you need to do and think about and how you need to prepare ... So those students who contact you are obviously at an advantage to begin with. The material that I send is available to them when they go to the online page as well, but that kind of personal response sometimes is useful.

Richard provides the opportunity for all the students to get involved early by opening up online access before the unit starts and arranging for them to participate in online discussions in the first week of the course. This makes his expectations clear to the students and also enables him to assess the level of the students’ engagement.

Normally we open up that unit for students a week or two prior to that so that they could get their heads around what’s involved ... Sometimes people who post online think it’s easy but it needs to be very clearly integrated ... The way I’ve now designed my online forum discussions is that I ask for original posts in week 1 by the Wednesday of the first week; there’s no opportunity to have a break in the introduction. So that’s why we say they have access to the unit module one or two weeks before so they can see what’s expected of them.

He provides a comment based on the overall engagement of the students, providing encouragement and pointing out what they need to do next so that the students know and understand his expectations. He regards that as tutorial participation and as essential in an online unit to get students engaging rather than just absorbing information.

In the second unit he teaches, a history unit about Greek heroes and heroines, Richard similarly encourages early student commitment through a small compulsory assignment in the first week of the unit. This provides him with essential information about the students and the students with an understanding of what’s expected of them.

I just simply asked students in their first week, answer the question: ‘What is a hero?’ Bring your answer to your first tutorial, write no more than 300 words, submit it to your tutor ... you can tell what level a student is by their response to that question, and you can design a very simple task. It’s not heavily weighted in terms of the assessment component, but it will allow a new student, international students particularly, to understand instantaneously, ‘OK, am I operating at the right level or I really need to sharpen in terms of how I’m expressing myself?’ The assessment is whether they’re actually able to communicate because you design a question which can’t be answered by cut and paste and that’s helpful for them as much as anything else because they know what you’re expecting. It’s much about your expectation as it is about their performance level and so you can do that fairly early because they need to know [what] they’re supposed to do.

Bryce is one of those who provide an introductory video as a personal introduction to the unit so students have a sense of the presence of the teacher. He was aware of the inequity for distance students, where a unit is delivered to on-campus and online

students and so aimed to reduce the sense that external students were disadvantaged in comparison with on-campus students who could meet the lecturer in person.

It was pretty important to treat these students as I would treat groups of students in a classroom right in front of me. I thought that that was important 'cause I was the convener of the unit. They knew me from the forums and all the introductions on the website so I thought it would've seemed a little incongruous if they hadn't heard my voice. [The academic who initiated the unit] and I also did a couple of quick videos where we spoke to a camera saying, 'Hi everyone, I'm Bryce, this is Derek. This unit is about blah blah. We hope you get this out of the unit etc., etc.' so that they can actually see us because the lectures were all audio or PowerPoint and they didn't see me at all. So doing that little, quick two-minute video was a way to provide a presence that online students don't often get because they've just got audio.

Motivation

Motivation is of great importance because it influences the way in which students learn, and increased motivation leads to enhanced results (Oxford & Shearin, 1994, cited in Nehme, 2010). When students are motivated, "communication [between learner and lecturer] flows, discipline problems lessen, anxiety [of learners] decreases" (Wlodkowski, 1978, cited in Nehme, 2010). For example, time management strategies which assist students to plan ahead in their learning and assessments will help them to achieve the goals of self-directed learning. Kops (2012) has found that best practice in intensive units aims to coach students on time management to help them "keep pace" (p. 54). The recommended strategies, which include "stressing the importance of beginning course work early, alerting students to the intensity and faster pace, and warning students not to overextend themselves with too many outside activities" (p. 54), are ones that Anna uses. In the units that she teaches there are discussion readings, and activities, but no formal lectures. She advises against constructing the unit week by week, instead recommending modularising the unit so the students can self-pace. This requires thought not only about sequencing but also about the time the preparatory learning will take the students before they can address the set tasks.

Because with modules, students can self-pace, what, in my way of thinking, you need to make it clear up front is the hours of study that are required and how they need to manage it. I just found, thinking of what the key things were, and putting them in modules, and then thinking about what the workload was like in each of those, that's quite a useful thing to do.

Integral to each module of the unit that Anna teaches are the key activities, the key literature that the students need to engage with and scaffolded through are the three assessment tasks, linked in to the learning outcomes. And because it is an online unit, there are a number of online activities that the students are assessed on. Anna acknowledges a need for flexibility in unit timings but a need to provide certainty so students know they have to be timely in submitting their assessments.

Now, having said that it [the unit] has flexibility, I do have deadlines on the submission dates. And when I introduce the unit in session 3, I always indicate to the students that obviously they are studying in an intensive mode, they must understand that. Their commitment is they're expected to undertake 135 hours, and I tell them what that includes, and it's also written in the unit guide. I said you can manage when you're going to undertake the activities, but there are deadlines on the assessment tasks that must be adhered to.

For Steve the structure is in that there is a schedule of what every lecture is about; students are alerted to the structure and the importance of doing the reading; and the podcast nature of the lectures means students can access the audio and the slides at the time or for revision.

It's quite clear that the first lecture will be an introduction, why we're here, what we're supposed to be learning ... what's the [text] book about, and why is it covered in detail, that kind of mindmap outline in the lectures. The lectures go on for really about an hour and a half and the format is sort of podcasts; it's a recording and you have PowerPoint slides ... and you can flick through those and they're quite informative. And they listen to my audio. So, it's pretty simple because when we started out, we couldn't do complicated.

Online discussion boards may be used as a compulsory assessment item. The majority of students in one study (Birch & Volkov, 2007) enjoyed this type of task and recognised that it “allowed them to achieve a range of cognitive and social learning outcomes, as well as to develop some important graduate skills” (p. 293). Because Max has noticed that the students who sign in regularly have better marks than those who do not, he organises the discussion forums to require participation.

The students by their very nature, they look at the course, what's the first thing that they look at? It's the assessment. And they can work out what's needed and not needed so you need to have a mark, and I have 15 marks for participation for those web forums. So, that's probably the main thing is, if you participate, good contribution, you do well, 15. If you don't participate, well ... So that's pretty black and white.

Sequencing of assessment

This theme describes the acknowledgement by the interviewees that well-sequenced assessment affords benefits to IMD distance students. Teachers in the study did all of things recommended for assessment strategies in intensive courses. In Lee and Horsfall's (2010) study, the timing of assessment was found to be a “major factor” affecting student experiences with the need for convenors to plan assessment tasks so that they were not “overlapping” or “concentrated” at the end of the term (p. 199). The interviewees adapted the purpose, scope, and timing of assessments according to the time frame of the course, with purposes including providing feedback to assist student learning (formative assessment) and making judgments on student learning (summative assessment) (Daniel, 2000; Davies, 2006; Kretovics, Crowe, & Hyun, 2005; Scott, 2003; cited in Lee & Horsfall, 2010).

Anna explains the importance of clearly sequencing the assignments, taking into account what students need to know at a particular point so they can build on this and consolidate their learning through scaffolded tasks.

You need to scaffold your assessments. And you need to spread it out, you need to think what do they have to know and by when and what's captured in that particular assignment. I try to make it so ... what I would call the significant learning outcomes – are woven through all the three tasks. If you had some big ideas and concepts and you only put it in one task. [Otherwise] I think that it makes it very difficult for the student and [for] making a judgment about how well the student comes to terms with what they've been learning.

This form of continuous assessment performs a “dual function”: it reduces isolation for the student and allows the instructor to monitor student integration and progress

(Lansdell, p. 161). Richard and Bruno both altered their expectations about the viability of setting essay assignments. Bruno changed the assessment from three long essays:

[I] introduced more assessment tasks, smaller ones ... quizzes and short answers, that sort of thing. I thought essay writing is such a time-consuming thing and it requires students to take the time to research and read a lot and write a lot, and spend a lot of time correcting their writing. There was still one essay at the end, and that was a wider reflective task about how they've perceived the unit as a whole, which would ideally be the end point of those many small assessment tasks.

Like Bruno, Richard's awareness of the lack of time students have, was turned into an opportunity to teach them to write succinctly. One of the assignments for his unit is either a tutorial paper or a short essay because:

It can't be a long essay in that brief time that goes with whatever readings that are connected with the topics, so we don't want any more than 1500 words regardless of whether it is a 1000–1500–word paper, a tutorial paper, or an essay, and that's easier for the marker as well because one of the skills in [the discipline] that you most need to convey is, 'Can you actually say what you need to say succinctly, express yourself clearly, can you address a question directly?' And it immediately draws a line under those students who perhaps just simply cut and paste everything that they seek, the topics, the question, so that's useful from the point of view of assessment to discriminate.

The strategies adopted by Bruno and Richard align with that of Kops (2012), who found that “high performing instructors did a number of things to allow students to complete assignments more readily without compromising the integrity of the course” (p. 53). Examples include “deconstructing” single longer assessments into frequent shorter assessments, scheduling the first assessment early in the course, and rescheduling assessments to fit the “rhythm” of the course, without compromising the integrity of expectations and standards in the course (Kops, pp. 53–54). This study is supported by Scott (2003) and Daniel (2000, cited in Lee & Horsfall, 2010), who have advocated that assessment tasks should be designed progressively rather than relying on a single, large assessment task at the end of the course.

Technology

It was hardly surprising that the interviewees all referred to the effective use of technology in synchronous and asynchronous learning environments; after all these were the tools on which they depended. They had all developed expertise in the use of these tools over a period of time. They were all also willing to engage in professional development to enhance their expertise and practice.

To facilitate engagement, the material in the online program needs to “promote interaction and motivation, which are vital ingredients in online learning, while recognising that students are largely responsible for their own learning” (Keefe, 2003, cited in Lansdell, 2009, p. 167). The way this can best be facilitated is by providing materials that are “visual, animated, auditory, and/or linked to other sites”, in order to account for a variety of learning styles. Research confirms a connection between the interactivity of the program and levels of satisfaction with online delivery (Keefe, 2003, cited in Lansdell, 2009, p. 167).

Online programs can “encourage deep learning”, which may be partly because they can work at a time most suitable to their learning needs (Emerson & MacKay,

2006, p. 2) by enabling students to work in their own time and at their own pace. Several of the courses used podcasts to duplicate the classroom lecture (O'Bannon, Lubke, Beard, & Britt, 2011) or as an effective assessment tool (Bartle, Longnecker, & Pegrum, 2010).

Steve says that, because he cannot connect visually with the students as “they’re in another continent or something”, he values the flexibility of the online teaching environment, including the recording of lectures as podcasts, which means students can listen as many times as they like to what he says.

But the beauty of it is they can just replay, play it back and talk to their mates and go, ‘What the hell is he talking about here?’ And I keep it in clear modules, and I make sure that I make issue out of the bits that are really important to them.

The course Richard teaches is also offered in on-campus mode. His adaptation of the assessments to suit the online environment included online discussions and adapting a component which involved, for on-campus students, accessing a number of artefacts in the university’s museum in order to do an interpretative analysis of them. For the students studying at a distance he has provided a QuickTime view of the artefacts.

They do the same exercises, but they aren’t expected, for example, to have as much access to the material artefact, or, for example, they can’t access the full catalogue which relates to the particular artefact in special reserve. I’ve provided excerpts from that catalogue for the equivalent external experience. There are variations depending on their access to materials.

Three of those interviewed had had assistance in developing their courses from a team which included instructional designers. This had enabled them to develop innovative activities and assignments for students, whether domestic or international, to do in their own time and own space. The whole course that Max runs is delivered using a synchronous collaborative online tool and is also available for students to access later. The unit is:

Designed, delivered live online. I use a lot of applications for teaching and probably the best one at the moment, I’m using is the Elluminate product, which is a live classroom where you can actually present and it gives you the chance for students to ask questions.

As Max talks, he watches the questions students write appear on his screen and decides when to switch to responding to them. Technology also assists with the timely submission of assessments in Max’s unit. Students type their answers online in a 2-h essay-based online exam and then, once they have checked their answers, they submit them.

Anna has strong reservations about the use of interactive media because she is aware that it can be a time-wasting experience.

And then I have the blogs and the forums set up in there, focused around particular topics that are relevant to the unit as I don’t like unstructured conversation going. I know some people do and, don’t get me wrong, it does have a role. But I think if you want to go and have a bit of a chat with your fellow students then you can set that up on Facebook or whatever you want, but not in the unit. So there is opportunity for conversation around themes that I have broadly identified but there is still scope there for students to bring in their own ideas, but they’re communicating with each other on key things.

However, Anna values the expert assistance of the educational designers (E.D.s) and points out that the ways in which technology can help staff provide feedback means the students can get this more quickly. Such timely responses strengthen student motivation.

I really think it's essential to work with the E.D.s when you're developing this kind of thing. I've introduced the assignment tool because I have activities embedded in the unit to make sure that they're engaging with it. They submit their [assignment] in that tool, and in then at the side of it, there's a little box so as soon as it comes in, I can just look at it, and see if everything looks OK, and then I type back and say 'You've correctly identified the key issues' and they get immediate feedback on their activity. What I was doing before was just getting them to email in it, and then just emailing it back. Well, having it sit inside the LMS system is really helpful. And anything that cuts down time and can make things more efficient is great.

Feedback in online courses in the form of assessment needs to be more frequent than in face-to-face modes (Goetz, 2009, cited in Lansdell, 2009), to help model the assessment requirements (Barnet, Egan, Ross, Ryan, & Shaw, 2004). Anna found the need for swift feedback when teaching in an online mode was made easier by the use of technology.

I use Grademark, and I find that to be a very expedient way for me, of marking. It's online, it's just submitted in there, so I can just go in and mark straight away. It doesn't take me long and then I can have them all ready to go out on the date. So I try to return assignments in around a week after the submission date. The assignment that I do first, which is what I would call a quiz or a more open-book exam, marks itself because it's programmed into the system. It gives the student the feedback, when they've answered the question, if they've answered it correctly or incorrectly, and then it tells them what the answer should be. And then when I look across the answers at the end, I can pick up any key areas where students have experienced any difficulties.

Communication

Students highly valued communication in order to help build a positive learning environment and a sense of community within the class. Ramsay (2011) discusses the value of the teacher creating and maintaining a "sense of community" within the class through activities such as "group exercises, social events and individual introductions at the beginning of each subject" (p. 98). The teachers, when interviewed, described a range of strategies for maintaining communication with the students. Some were willing to be available to be contacted at any time; others put strict rules around their availability. What was revealed by student comments as important was the need for clarity of expectations about when the teacher was available and the probable response time.

Max, a part-time lecturer, feels less constrained than his colleagues in adopting an individual approach and choosing to put no constraints on when he is available. His approach is based on his experience as an entrepreneur in the online world.

In an online area, that flexibility gives you the ability of tailoring your course to ... when students are available. Lecturers need to be a lot more flexible too, you know; they're not there to have consultation hours. This day, these hours, you know, it's 24/7. And also, you build your course around that so the part of the flexibility is when you're available and when you're going to teach. And I think the expectation is when you go online – I've been involved with it in the industry point of view, you know – Google doesn't say, 'It's a public holiday, and now on Christmas day, we're closed'.

Amazon doesn't say it either. When you go online, you're open 24/7, and that's an expectation of your audiences and customers, in our case, students.

For Richard too, it's the students' situations that matter, though he identifies variation within the groups of students.

Well, theoretically, it really does depend on how needy the cohort is. Sometimes you have a cohort which are quite happy keep to their own devices ... Other times, there are a quite a number of students who are finding it difficult for any number of reasons so it just depends. You've really just got to be on board, to be prepared, to be available I think. Often at times, students don't have the time to wait, and their access to online is limited, in a particular country or simply because they're working to a schedule ... and so consequently they're really under pressure, and need an answer to a question very quickly.

He advocates planning very carefully about what the students are going to be able to deal with to ensure that what is asked of them will not result in confusion and provoke more questions than can be easily handled. Steve and Max choose to be available beyond what can normally be expected. Max points out that, "Of course a lot of lecturers don't want that," but he believes, "Oh, like I said, 'you're on call', so you've got to get used to having text messages, strange hours." Steve has provided constant email access:

They can email me anytime, and I'll answer them pretty promptly ... you answer them as quickly as you can, and we've got Skype and they can actually call me and talk to me face-to-face. And we've got the phone ... they can ring me ... But of course it can be expensive, depends on where you are ... So, you know, you've got plenty of access. I know a lot of lecturers who don't give out mobile phone numbers because it's a private matter. Look, these are young people, they're busy, it's summer, they don't care, it's only when they go into panic mode, they ring ya. When it's 5 minutes to midnight, then everybody wants to talk. Then you go, woop, sorry, I'm only human.

These teachers enjoy the contact and that they are sessional, not full-time teachers, and the fact that the time commitment is over a limited period may well be why they do not feel the need to limit their interaction with the students strictly. That is not the case for those who are full-time academics. They are very aware of the need to plan ahead to manage their communication with the class and limit the volume of student emails. Bruno points out this has benefits for the students by providing them with clear expectations and a sense of security as well as enabling him to manage his workload.

I think what I did [was] just maintain a very regular presence on [the course web page] giving them updates. I would send out a message that gets emailed to the students once a week or even more often saying you know, unit update, this is what we are doing this week, here are the due dates. Just to let them know all the time here I am, this is what's happening in the unit, these are the tasks you need to be doing ... Yeah, just that regular presence might have minimised or at least cut down all the student emails.

Anna's strategy is clearly communicated to the students. She spells out when she will respond to different types of requests for information and prioritises requests about assessment.

I monitor it and I just tell them, I will go into this unit on a Wednesday from these times, and that's when I will look through it. Because I have it set up I have an assessment section, and any questions about assessment are all collated together. So if a student asks something about an assessment, then, when I provide an answer all the other students can see it because that might be something that they want to find out about or

need to know about. So that's quite, that's a bit more open, but I have that linked into my email because I think that's one area that you have to respond to very quickly, and I will respond to those as they come in.

That she teaches courses for students who are close to finishing their degrees connects with her philosophy that while her role is to facilitate and guide, the students are the learners and therefore have to take responsibility for their learning.

But if it's just, you know, general stuff, I can see it coming in, they need to know that I will come to it at these times and I need that for my sanity as well. And the other thing is, I say to them, right you are ... you are the catalyst for your learning, and it's your job to be independent in here and interact here with your peers, it's your responsibility, my job is to guide and facilitate. I mean I'm not the learner, you are. And I state that very clearly, up front in the unit because I don't see it as my job to be in there for 5 hours a week. You know I'm usually in there for about 2 hours, depending on the number of students and that's it.

In this final, sixth, strategy, it may appear that the teachers are further apart than in the previous five strategies discussed but, in this as in all the other strategies they adopted, what all the teachers had in common and conveyed to their students was the sense that they cared about the students' learning. Their commitment to providing the best possible experience for the students permeated their decisions about the design and the conduct of the courses they were responsible for.

Conclusion

The interviews revealed the strategies used by the highly regarded teachers used which aided students making effective use of the time available for study. These are:

- taking into account the nature and diversity of the cohort and their particular needs when designing the unit;
- encouraging commitment at the commencement of the unit;
- motivating the students through structuring the unit for clarity in design and presentation;
- incorporating a well-sequenced assessment, including the need for swift feedback;
- using learning technologies effectively for synchronous and asynchronous interaction and to motivate students to learn;
- developing and maintaining a strategy for communicating with students.

The importance for the students of the strategies the teachers had identified as elements to enhance students' commitment to task were confirmed in data gathered from interviews with, and surveys of, students in another part of this study to be reported in due course. Further, the interviews had not been constructed to check whether there were parallels between the recommendations in the literature and those of the expert teachers, but comparing the two reveals a close congruence between the teachers' observations about strategies of engagement and those from other research. The expertise and commitment of the teachers were manifested in their choice of strategies.

Despite significant restraints of time as well as distance, expert teaching in intensive courses can encourage student engagement, enhance student use of learning time and result in satisfying student learning experiences. The approaches and

strategies developed by these teachers can act as useful models for distance courses offered in more conventional time frames and are equally applicable in online and distance education regardless of the course being intensive or otherwise.

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Note

1. All names are pseudonyms.

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