

THE CHANGED DYNAMICS OF TEACHING ON-CAMPUS STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Traditional universities in Australia seek to provide academic programs based on a high quality campus experience for undergraduate students, where the role of technology is to enhance this campus experience. While the teaching mode of lectures and practicals has largely remained unchanged, as evidenced in the findings of the ten-year Australian study involving first year students, there has been a major shift over the last decade in the expectations students have from the university system, in particular in relation to their participation in on-campus activities. At the same time, the teaching programs have been subject to greater scrutiny for quality, and student satisfaction with teaching is one of the most important aspects considered in the formula for ranking and funding departments and universities. This paper will discuss the changed dynamics of teaching on-campus students shaped by the tension between what students want and what is academically sound, and the tension experienced by teaching staff between providing leadership to mould student expectations and attracting high ratings in subject evaluations. The discussion will be situated in the context of delivering first year science programs in a traditional Australian university, where the on-campus subject delivery is supported by a learning management system to facilitate access to information and communication, and to provide opportunities for self-evaluation and feedback. The issues discussed are universal in the western world and would be of interest to all conference participants.

KEYWORDS

Student expectations, learning management system, teaching practices

BACKGROUND: THE CHANGED LANDSCAPE FOR UNIVERSITY TEACHING

Traditional universities in Australia seek to provide academic programs based on a high quality campus experience. Science subjects in particular are still being delivered through lectures and laboratory and/or practice classes. However, while the teaching mode and the attendance expectations of the teaching staff have remained largely unchanged, there has been a significant shift in how students prepare for a career, what they expect from a university experience, and in particular, the time they spend on campus (Krause, 2005; McInnis, 2000).

Over the last decade Australian universities have become more client centred in a market-driven economy. The increased fees for domestic students, and the need to recruit international students due to decreased government funding of universities, has meant that our students are now paying significantly more for their studies than a decade ago. In this environment the student voice has gained prominence, and is playing an important role in the reputation of the universities. National and international league tables are becoming an important reference for students selecting university courses. Although these rankings are based on various measures, student surveys on satisfaction with teaching are a significant factor. Furthermore, Australian universities are being ranked on their performance in education for the purpose of accessing additional funding. The Learning and Teaching Performance Fund introduced by the Australian government in 2006 is largely based on student satisfaction with their degrees and employment outcomes, as expressed four months after graduation (LTPF, 2007). Most universities have also introduced regular institution-wide evaluation of the individual subjects in the undergraduate programs and of the student experience while still completing their studies, as mechanisms for

addressing areas of dissatisfaction and monitor improvements (Monash, 2005). The results of these evaluations are published on a public website (Monash, 2006). Subject evaluation by students has now become a standard component of the performance management of the individual academics, generating angst which is putting teaching staff under an enormous amount of stress.

This paper discusses the changed dynamics of teaching on-campus undergraduate students shaped by the tension between what students want and what is academically sound, and the tension experienced by teaching staff between providing leadership to mould student expectations (James, 2002) and attracting high ratings in subject evaluations. The discussion is presented from the author's perspective of delivering first year science programs at Monash University, a traditional Australian university with a centrally supported learning management system; however, the issues discussed are universal in the western world and readers from other institutions and countries are invited to consider how much of what follows applies to their own teaching environments.

THE CHANGING STUDENT PROFILE AND EXPECTATIONS: THE CHALLENGES

Over the last decade there have been significant changes in the profile of students inhabiting the Australian university campuses. The student population has become more diverse, with an increased number of mature-aged students and international students. There have also been changes in how students balance work, studies and their social life. Findings from a ten-year Australian study of the attitudes and experiences of first year students sheds light on the changes in the student profile (Krause, 2005). This study confirmed that student engagement with university life has diminished significantly over the last decade; students are spending more time on paid employment and social activities and less time attending classes. The study also confirmed anecdotal evidence that more than one half of the students are now reporting that they miss classes sometimes, and close to one tenth does so frequently, and that they make use of web resources as a substitute for attending classes. Almost all students surveyed reported regular use of the web to access notes and materials; the majority find these resources useful, and more than one half find that these resources help them to learn at their own pace. Those who miss classes make use of the web as a substitute, and are more likely to use email to contact their peers and their teachers to make up for missed classes. However, despite the increasing use of information and communication technologies, students still find value in attending on-campus activities; recent research suggests that despite having different learning styles, Australian students do not feel comfortable with subject offered entirely online, and prefer a face-to-face component in their programs (Tennet, 2005).

Although the first year study (Krause, 2005) found that students are generally more positive now than ten years ago with respect to university meeting their expectations, many still find that teaching staff are not really interested in their progress, and are not satisfied with the quality and quantity of the feedback they receive. The study also found that international students, which now form an increasing proportion of the student cohorts, are generally less satisfied with their university experience. Outcomes of the student evaluations undertaken at Monash University are consistent with these national findings.

Most of our current students grew up with computers, the internet, and mobile phones. Technology is integral to all aspects of their lives. They learn using computers, phone, MSN chat, mp3 players, internet and books simultaneously. They are the "connected", or the "Y" generation who want quick responses to all their needs and who expect to learn "just in time". On the other hand, this generation of students have a greater sense of purpose, and clearer goals, and when it comes to selection of courses, their parents have an increasing influence (Krause, 2005).

Working with these students presents a big challenge for the teaching staff which still largely involves the baby-boomer generation—a generation that is considered to be hardworking, conservative and persevering (Robbins, 2004), and who would have largely completed their undergraduate studies attending every single on-campus scheduled class, and had very little access to personal attention from their teachers. This generational mismatch generates tensions of clashing expectations. Some academics

are rather critical and pessimistic, they believe that students have become unreasonably demanding, and that the majority are interested more in obtaining a qualification than in learning. They are concerned that university courses are degenerating into a process of passing exams rather than learning and intellectual and social development.

Although sound practices in university teaching have been advocated for a long time and vastly written about (eg Laurillard, 1996; Ramsden, 1992; Biggs, 1999; Angelo, 1999), “transmissive” teaching still remains the most predominant teaching mode in the sciences at traditional universities. The focus is still largely on the lectures. This was made evident at our institution as a consequence of teaching staff having to formally respond to the recently introduced institution-wide subject evaluations. It was not a surprise then that missing lectures was seen as the main challenge that needed attention. Some academics remain convinced that having lecture PowerPoint slides and taped lectures available on the internet is at the heart of the problem, and are the main cause of student disengagement. While they are concerned about students’ belief that the PowerPoint lecture presentations published online are “the curriculum”, they also acknowledge that these resources are of great value for students for revision.

However, students’ expectations cannot be addressed by focussing exclusively on the lecture program. Subject evaluations have highlighted that today it is not enough to “just teach” and to be a good and enthusiastic speaker. Student evaluations have proved that no matter how good the lecturer’s expositions might be, student satisfaction with the subject will not be high unless appropriate attention is given to every aspect of the delivery of the subject (Monash, 2006). Lecturers need to think about how to reach *all* students—not only those who sit in the lecture theatre, they need to be concerned about how to present each lecture knowing that the students present are likely to not be the same as in the previous lecture, how to make sure that the information and housekeeping matters reach every student enrolled, how to keep track of student progress, how to provide meaningful feedback, how to follow up students who do not attend, and how to deal with the many requests from students seeking all kinds of special arrangements to accommodate their busy lives (Varsavsky, 2006). In addition, where large groups of students are involved, it is important that there is a close communication between the tutors and other members of the teaching team to ensure that all students are provided with an equivalent experience. In summary, attention to all administrative and student management aspects is as important as the subject content and the alignment of all teaching and learning activities with the subject objectives.

THE ROLE OF LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Although the reasons for the changes in behavioural patterns and expectations of students outlined above are very complex, the widespread access to sophisticated communication and information technology is no doubt an important factor. On the other hand, technology also plays an important role in addressing and shaping student expectations.

As in most tertiary institutions in Australia, the use of technology in teaching at Monash University shifted from the few enthusiastic but isolated innovators to largely all teaching staff. This move to a mass use of technology for teaching coincided with the licence purchase of a commercially available learning management system (WebCT Vista). This large financial commitment aimed to enable innovation and provide central support to all staff to complement and enhance the campus experience with online resources and activities, but as pointed out by Coates *et al* its adoption was also due in part to competitive pressures between institutions (Coates et al, 2005).

As at other institutions, the uptake of WebCT at Monash University has been almost universal, and it could be argued that this was largely due to its perceived easy-to-use interface. However, contrary to the promotion of these learning management systems as tools for student-centred learning, such currently implemented systems have been designed to support content oriented approaches (Oliver, 2004). It is not a surprise then that its use is mostly limited to teacher centred pedagogies which could be supported with more cost effective technologies such as ftp (Phillips, 2006).

Regardless of the motives and political forces behind the introduction of WebCT Vista and the debates about its pedagogical value as an online tool, this learning management system has been embraced by the academic community at Monash University. In science classes it is largely used to enhance the campus experience by providing students with access to lecture notes, taped lectures and/or PowerPoint presentations, problem sets and lab activities, all subject administrative information, and relevant links to outside resources. In addition, most make use of discussion forums to facilitate further interaction with their peers and with the teaching staff—although with varying success—, the use of the online submission and return of assignments is rapidly increasing, and weekly short tasks such as quizzes are very common, particularly in large first and second year classes.

WebCT has also attracted acceptance from students, who now expect to have a WebCT site for every subject they undertake. Through subject evaluations and the Monash Experience Questionnaire (Monash, 2003) and follow-up focus groups, science students indicate that teaching resources and facilities are appropriate for their needs, and in particular, they are satisfied with the online resources.

The areas identified by students as not being generally satisfactory are directly related to access to human resources. The provision of useful feedback given in time to help students to improve, and the time and effort their teachers put into commenting on their work and understanding the difficulties they might be having with their work are the lowest rated survey items. Students also frequently complain that their individual learning needs, and their ideas and suggestions are not taken into account.

Some lecturers are hence puzzled by the apparent contradiction they perceive between what students say and their behavioural patterns. Students are not taking all opportunities for face-to-face interaction in on-campus activities, but would like to have greater attention to their needs. Weekly quizzes do not seem to be perceived as useful and timely feedback. Students complain about feedback, but marked assignments with lengthy comments are left uncollected at the end of the semester. Students are given the opportunity to evaluate subjects, but claim that their ideas and suggestions are not being considered.

The systematic use of subject evaluation has generated fruitful pedagogical discussions and exchange of teaching practices, discussion that is moving away from content and how to present a particular topic in a lecture or how to use a fancy interactive resource, but revolves around how to make students happy with their whole experience with the subject, which very often turns the focus on how to make the most of WebCT Vista to achieve this goal. On the surface, it would appear that there is nothing particularly different in the subjects that seem to be more effective in the eyes of the students; these successful subjects are delivered through lectures and lab/tutorials, students complete various assignments throughout the semester and undertake regular online quizzes, and are supported with resources, administrative information, discussion forums in WebCT. The difference is that the subjects considered successful by students are usually the result of careful planning and are designed with all students in mind.

The design of subjects that successfully respond to and manage student expectations in this traditional teaching environment are based on sound pedagogical principles and make an effective use of the learning management system, not so much to “manage” the learning but rather to provide the support structure. Assessment is central to all teaching and learning activities, it includes online regular short tasks, and larger in-semester assignments, and is used as a feedback mechanism for both students and teachers. Attendance to lectures is not necessarily better than the average when students have access to taped lectures and/or lecture materials. Most importantly, student expectations are addressed by making explicit the rationale for everything students are expected to do, so they are not left guessing and making assumptions that would result in unreasonable demands (Varsavsky, 2006). Students are told explicitly

- How the teaching and learning activities, including assessment, interrelate and how these contribute to the intended learning outcomes.

- The feedback mechanisms available to them and how to make use of these. This is particularly important for first year students who have a very limited experience of feedback and who need to be guided to become independent learners.
- What is expected of them and what they can expect from the teaching staff, and
- The input received from students in previous semesters and how that influenced the changes made to the offering.

WebCT Vista is used

- To provide a common point of contact and help students feel part of a learning community.
- To ensure that all students have access to all resources, subject administrative information, and the rationale for the delivery of the subject. Given the mixed attendance patterns of students, teaching staff can no longer rely on the face-to-face communication, and all important administrative information is posted on the website. Particular attention is paid to the wording used and the tone of the communication to ensure that the message to the students is clear and unambiguous.
- For regular online short tasks. Quizzes are most common, but some subjects involve structured assessed discussion. Teaching staff monitors performance, and addresses misunderstanding in lectures and practice classes.
- To monitor student activity related to the subject. Log reports are very useful to follow up on students who seem to have disappeared under the radar. Students who cease to access the WebCT site can be followed up.
- To provide a common point of contact to all members of the teaching team (lecturers, tutors and subject coordinator). This is particularly useful in subjects involving several tutorials and more than one campus: tutors are also very busy people, and are usually Y-netters just as students are, and expect to have easy and quick access to resources and information without having to be present physically at a particular time in a particular location.

In summary, subjects that provide a well organised and structured program and spell out clearly what is expected from the students and what they can expect from the teaching staff, and provide a rationale for these expectations, are the subjects that attract the highest evaluation scores and where students perceive that the teaching team is interested in their progress.

CONCLUSION: BACK TO BASICS

Educators at traditional universities that made the strategic decision to provide an on-campus experience to their students are under increased pressure to respond to student demands without compromising the quality of the programs, but have the responsibility to provide the leadership for shaping the changing students expectations. The regular student evaluation of subjects in the Faculty of Science of Monash University has highlighted a need for reviewing teaching and learning practices that were not popular with the students. These evaluation processes highlighted that student expectations were not always unreasonable, and solutions now revolve almost invariably around revisiting the basic principles of good teaching. Most importantly, the evaluation process highlighted the need to pay particular attention to how expectations from students and of staff, the rationale for all teaching and learning activities of the subject are communicated to all students, and that the feedback loop is closed by providing information on what previous students said about the subject and how this was taken into account. WebCT, being the default tool available to all academics, plays the important role of providing a common point of contact and help students feel part of a learning community.

In this climate, the role of the teacher responsible for a subject has undergone significant changes. In addition to lecturing and delivering practicals, he/she is required to spend more time on ensuring that all teaching and learning activities linked in a way which is meaningful to all students—whether these are regularly attending on-campus activities or choose to come only to the compulsory components—, on articulating the rationale for all these activities and the input provided by previous students had, on ensuring that the feedback given throughout the semester is personalised and helps students to improve, and that all feedback mechanisms are being clearly communicated to students, on ensuring that the WebCT site is always up to date, on monitoring student posts on discussion forums, on replying to

emails from individual students, on monitoring student progress and on following up on the students who seem to have disappeared. In summary, while students spend less time on campus, teaching staff spend more time on the delivery of each subject, and much of this time is spent on purely administrative tasks.

This change in the teacher's role has had implications for recruiting new staff. Institutions who are being ranked by what students say, now consider several characteristics to be essential for any new appointment with teaching functions: good communication skills with passion for their discipline, a good understanding of the basic principles of good teaching practice, a commitment to students learning, excellent organisational skills, and demonstrated command of current technologies and ability to adapt to new technologies.

Although this paper presents the current issues faced by a particular faculty in the Australian context, these are similar to the issues faced at other institutions in the western world. Despite early claims that technology would change teaching and learning in higher education, this has not yet been realised (Twigg, 2001), at least not in traditional Australian universities. Technology is both, one of the drivers of the changes in student expectations and a vehicle for addressing these expectations. It is also interesting to observe that in the current climate where the student voice is being heard, there seems to be a decrease of initiatives involving sophisticated interactive technology; the emphasis is rather on ensuring that students receive enough feedback and attention from human beings.

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