Pedagogic Transformation at the University of Northampton

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Introduction

The University of Northampton is based in the town of Northampton, in England. We are what is often described as a 'widening participation' institution which means that we have a lot of non-traditional students such as those who are the first in their family to go to University, or who are from non-traditional groups within society. We have around 10,000 students at our main Waterside campus and associated buildings around Northampton, including postgraduate students at Masters and PhD level.

The University has a very clear and concise mission statement that summarises our institutional strategic plan, namely *Transforming Lives + Inspiring Change* (University of Northampton, 2017). This strategy builds heavily on our recognition as an Ashoka U *Changemaker Campus* and on our work in social enterprise and civic engagement. In 2017, the University was awarded gold in the UK Government's *Teaching Excellence Framework* which recognizes our focus as a teaching institution. The three main strands of our strategic plan are to be super supportive, future focused and to deliver social impact.

At the heart of our strategic plan is a statement that we will 'create a unique learning and teaching model' and this presentation focuses on telling the story of how we have achieved that – from initial conception of what this model would look like, to achieving widespread institutional change. The purpose of this presentation is to share our experiences of introducing a flexible approach to learning and teaching across the institution from initial conception to institutional transformation, to achieve a position where our approach – active blended learning – is our 'new normal'.

From Active and Blended Learning to Active Blended Learning (ABL)

As long ago as 1991, Bonwell and Eison defined active learning as involving students in 'doing things and thinking about the things they are doing', whereas blended learning as a concept typically focuses much more on the interaction between face-to-face teaching and the use of technology to support learning. Often, these two dimensions of the blend are considered to be the only features of a blended learning experience. Indeed, many conversations often follow, around the question of 'how much time is it appropriate to spend on each aspect?' Should it be 65% face-to-face and 35% online? I've worked at one institution where the requirement was for 25% of each programme to be put online. But is this the right approach? I would like to encourage you to think of blended learning far more broadly than this binary approach would suggest. Instead, I would propose to you that blended learning is in fact multi-faceted and there are many different dimensions of a learning and teaching experience that can – and indeed should – be appropriately blended, depending on staff preferences, student needs and the requirements of the subject being studied.

Here are just some examples:

Dimensions of the blend	
Face-to-face	Online
Online teaching	Independent learning
Individual	Group-based
Synchronous	Asynchronous
'purely academic'	Employability-focused
Campus-based	Mobile
Tutor assessed	Peer-assessed
Placement-intensive	Few, or no placements

Table 1: Dimensions of Blended Learning (Armellini, 2019)

And so actually the blend can consist of different degrees of any or all of these.

At the University of Northampton, these multiple dimensions of the blend, together with our understanding of active learning have combined in what we call 'active blended learning' (ABL). It is important to understand that ABL is not a prescriptive approach to learning and teaching, but more of a methodology or a concept. At the University of Northampton, a course follows an ABL methodology if it:

- Is taught through **student-centred** activities to develop **knowledge and understanding, independent learning & digital fluency**.
- Has a **core, collaborative face-to-face component**, explicitly linked to **learning activity outside the classroom**.
- Helps to develop **autonomy**, **Changemaker attributes** and **employability** skills (Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2019a).

From this definition, you can see a number of key features: a focus on students actively doing something that builds independent learning skills; the centrality of digital skills development; and a combination of face-to-face sessions that are collaborative in nature but intentionally linked to, or blended with, non-classroom activity of whatever form or nature is appropriate. Ultimately, the focus of this approach is to develop student autonomy, to develop their own changemaker attributes and to enhance their employability potential on graduation.

The title of this presentation signals clearly that I will be telling the story of how we moved from a rather generic ambition in our strategic plan to a position where ABL is 'the new normal' at Northampton – it is the way in which we deliver learning and teaching. Part of achieving that goal requires some intensive communications and work with our staff body to help them consider how to shift their practice to an ABL methodology. To do this, we needed to explain what the concept would look like in practice, and so, early on in the process, developed the 'ABL Arrow':
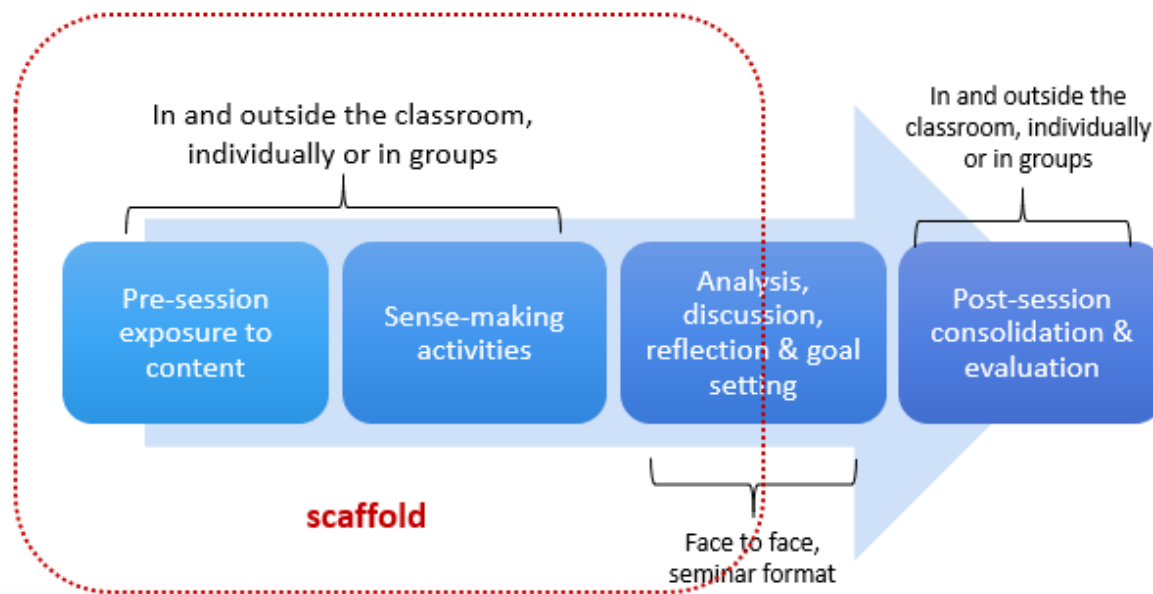
Figure 1: An early visualization of the concept of Active Blended Learning (Armellini, 2019)

Many aspects of this arrow will look familiar to readers from a learning and teaching background. Apart from box 2 – 'sense-making activities' - this arrow broadly depicts a traditional understanding of the flipped classroom. Students engage with some core content prior to class either individually or in groups, followed by analysis, discussion, reflection and goal-setting activities in the face-to-face session. Finally, there are some consolidation and evaluation activities that take place after the face-to-face session that can be completed individually or in groups. They could also be picked up in another face-to-face session.

The key difference between the traditional flipped classroom and ABL however, is the introduction of a sense-making stage between the preparatory work and the main face-to-face seminar. The purpose of this session is exactly as described – it gives the student an opportunity to explore what they have read, make sense of it and identify areas where additional support may be required. This is where the expertise of the tutor both as a subject/content-specialist and as a learning and teaching professional is key. Rather than using the face-to-face session as a way of transmitting content, that time is used in myriad different ways as shown in box 3 of the arrow. It could also be used for application activities that show whether the student has understood the content that was provided for the box 1 activities. But both the flipped classroom and ABL acknowledge one key factor that has changed and is continuing to change the face of learning and teaching – the fact that content is now 'out there'. It exists independently of institutions of learning and teaching, in their many formats. It can be Googled, found on TED Talks or interested parties can undertake a MOOC. But where our students particularly need help is in understanding how to apply that content to different scenarios, or transfer learning from one area to another area. I would often describe it to our staff as follows:

> I'm sorry to say this, but most of us are probably not the most dynamic speakers in the world. We may know our subject and be able to convey it to you. But you are not likely to remember me as the most dynamic speaker you've ever listened to. Very few people can speak in such a way that they are remembered for their delivery style. And often if they are, you remember their style, but not necessarily the substance of their presentation.

Moreover, if you give a lecture, you may find that the majority of your students understood 90% of that lecture. That's great. But what they really need from you is help to understand that remaining 10%. That's what the face-to-face sessions should be used for.

This approach identifies one of the early challenges that we faced in moving from a content-transmission approach to learning and teaching – often typified in the traditional lecture - to an Active Blended Learning approach, namely that the 10% for one student may well be different to the 10% for another student.

For some of our staff, the introduction of ABL was not a big shift in approach – they were already largely teaching in this way. But many of our staff felt uncertain of their role and place in the new order. They had to shift from a 'sage on the stage' approach to teaching, to being more of a 'guide on the side'. This shift has been critical for our students because, given their non-traditional background, and the fact that we are a relatively low-entry-tariff institution, the opportunity to draw on the knowledge and expertise of the tutor to help understand areas of difficulty and focus in on complex concepts, is critical.

Another approach we used was to ask staff to draw a quick picture of what they loved most about teaching. Of all the staff I conducted this exercise with, I only came across 2 staff who drew pictures of them delivering a lecture – and one of those studied drama and psychology and so loved the performance element of the lecture. By far the vast majority of staff drew themselves alongside students, working with them to enhance their understanding, drew the lightbulb moments or the collaborative learning experiences. These images enabled us to position ABL as an opportunity for them to 'do more of what you love'.

Another challenge we faced arose from the depiction of ABL as an arrow. The 4 boxes appeared like a process to be followed in a particular order, each distinct from the other. Actually, this isn't true. The notion of the blend in ABL, as we have seen, is that lots of features of learning and teaching should be blended. Our research with students (Palmer *et al*, 2017) showed that what staff needed to do to make ABL work included:

- Being explicit with students as to the pedagogical approach in use
- Blend both the face-to-face and online (or out-of-class) aspects of the learning experience
- Make sure each element of the programme is blended across online and face-to-face environments

To overcome the seemingly linear, prescriptive view of ABL that was caused by the 'arrow', we have reconceptualized ABL as follows:
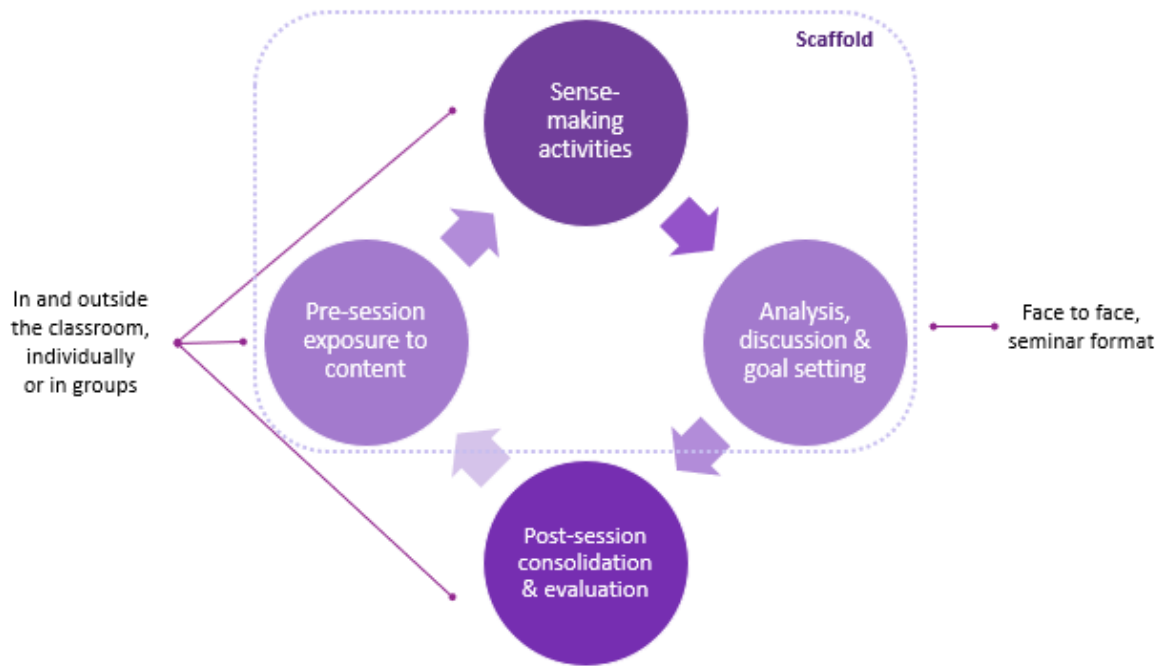
Figure 2: ABL Reconceptualised (Armellini, 2019)

As you can see, each of the 4 elements is still clearly visible, but this visual is less linear and more adaptive – in line with how ABL was originally conceptualised.

Staff Development and Capacity Building

Achieving wholesale adoption and implementation of ABL across all programmes and modules and embedding it into the standard teaching practices for all staff – including associate lecturers and hourly paid staff, was a huge challenge. To achieve it, we had an approach that was explicit (obvious, transparent to staff and with a clear plan for development) deliberate (planned and systematic) and evidence-based (using our own research findings).

It was agreed from the outset that our approach would not be one of employing a large central team to take existing teaching materials and turn them into online learning activities on behalf of academic staff. Rather we wanted to implement an approach that equipped our academic staff – as owners and deliverers of the teaching materials to design those materials in a way that suited them and which they could then adapt, change or enhance whenever they felt like it, without being reliant upon another team. In this way, we ensured that they retained a sense of agency over their work. This approach to capacity building was also important given the size and scale of the task we faced – over 2000 modules needed to be reviewed and redesigned where appropriate, to implement active blended learning. In this way, we were able to keep costs at a minimum whilst achieving high value in terms of outputs and buy-in from our academic staff. Where we did invest was in a small team of Learning Designers whose role it was to support staff with the review and redesign work through facilitation redesign workshops at module and programme level as appropriate.

Programme and Module (Re-)Design – The CAIeRO

Our core mechanism for achieving this redesign at Northampton was our CAIeRO workshop (Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2018a). CAIeRO stands for Creating Aligned, Interactive educational Resource Opportunities and is based on the Carpe Diem workshop that is perhaps more well-known (Salmon, n.d.), certainly in academic circles. It quickly became clear that if

we were to effectively evidence progress with the shift to ABL and reassure our governing body that we were on target to meet the strict timeframes that we had for the redesign work, we needed to incorporate the workshop into our internal quality processes. We also needed to ensure that any outputs from the CAIeRO were constructively aligned to each other. Our systematic approach to learning design enabled us to develop a programme blueprint (CAIeRO Stage 1, Programme level) to provide a level of consistency across all associate modules. In this way, a shared vision of the programme and how it would be experienced by our students was developed. This shared vision was then reconceptualized at module level through a taking apart and rebuilding of the core elements of the module – the learning outcomes, the learning and teaching methods (in our case, ABL), and the assessments (CAIeRO Stage 1, Module level). So even if the programme team were unable to co-design the modules, their collaborative development of the programme blueprint provided a negotiated and agreed basis for the design work at the level of all the modules to proceed. The workshops then continued with the remaining stages of the CAIeRO process: storyboarding, prototyping, reality checking, reviewing and action planning (see further Usher, 2014)

The COGS Learning Outcomes Toolkit

Further support for staff was delivered through the development of our award-winning (Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2018b) COGS Learning Outcomes toolkit (Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education, 2018c). COGS stands for Changemaker Outcomes for Graduate Success and is a tool to support the writing of learning outcomes that are consistent across the level of academic study (e.g. first year of a 3-year undergraduate degree) but tailored and flexible to accommodate discipline nuances. COGS is also the tool by which the University could embed its Employability and Changemaker attributes into all programmes and modules, thereby ensuring a consistent entitlement for all students in terms of supporting their readiness for graduate employment. The ChANGE Framework (Changemaker Attributes at Northampton for Graduate Employability) is a framework that captures and articulates the transferable, lifelong learning skills that, through a large collaborative project, the University has agreed are critical if we are to appropriately prepare our students for life and work, post-graduation (Institute of Learning and Teaching, 2019b).

Working towards Digital Fluency

For ABL to work properly i.e. in a way that meets the needs of the subject discipline, is appropriate for the student demographic and comfortable for the tutor delivering the module, it was necessary to ensure that our staff possessed the right digital skills to teach in this way. While the vast majority of staff possessed a level of digital literacy (articulated here as being able to use their digital skills to enhance their own teaching – with support), we wanted to move them along a digital skills continuum through a place where they would describe themselves as digitally competent (i.e. they could autonomously enhance their teaching by using a range of digital tools) to a place of digital fluency, where they could lead digital transformation to support departmental and institutional growth. While this is still a work in progress, our focus was less on specific technological solutions and more on attitudes and behaviours that demonstrated digital fluency based on pedagogical appropriateness. So our approach was to ask 'what do you want to achieve?' before looking at potential technological solutions, rather than to say 'here is a piece of shiny, new technology – how can you use this in your teaching?'

Some staff either were, or quickly became our digital champions through trialling new – and appropriate – technological solutions and then sharing their experiences with their colleagues. Not surprisingly, the full range of digital skills and attitudes towards digital development were visible.

Support here came from our Learning Technology team who worked closely with the Learning Designers in the CAIeRO workshops to showcase and support the use of learning technologies.

ABL and our new Waterside Campus

Through these approaches, and with these different methods of support and development, Active Blended Learning has become the 'new normal' at the University of Northampton. It is different from hybrid or standard blended learning (online + face-to-face) as has been demonstrated above. But these differences are also visible to anyone taking a walk around our new campus. In September 2018, the University opened its brand new, £350m Waterside Campus – a University whose infrastructure was built to deliver an ABL learning experience. There is only 1 traditional style lecture theatre, seating 80 people and only a handful of larger teaching spaces (for 40 or more). The vast majority of teaching spaces are based on small group delivery, suitable for active blended learning. Our main learning building is intentionally built around the student – teaching spaces, library and human resources (academic staff, academic skills support teams, student services and support, IT) are both fluid and present around the student. The other 2 main buildings comprise studio and laboratory spaces for our arts, science and technology programmes and a Senate building which houses the University management team and a considerable number of small teaching rooms.

Our teaching spaces are clutter-free. There are no lecterns, fixed computers, cables, connectors, protectors or keyboards. Rather all staff were issued with a high spec laptop that would connect to a large screen in the teaching room over the wifi – functioning as a second screen for the tutor. Some rooms had multiple screens enabling small groupwork centered around a large screen and we partnered with a company called Barco, to deliver functionality via these screens to further support ABL. In this way, students could view any presentation slides on their own laptops, staff could poll students to test understanding, students could ask anonymous questions without fear of embarrassment and staff could then download any data from the polling or questions and use this feedback as a method of quality enhancement.

Higher Education 4.0

The fact that we are at this conference, discussing flexible learning, shows something that we all know – Higher Education is, and will likely remain in, a state of flux. At the University of Northampton, we have sought to address this head on, by introducing a flexible approach to learning and teaching that has adaptability built in and which is, hopefully, future-proofed to some extent. Salmon has summarized the historical changes to HE (Salmon, n.d.2) from the perspectives of learners, learning, knowledge, academics, teaching, graduate-ness, technology and learning locations. My colleague at Northampton has articulated what each of these looks like for us – *in our institutional context*, as follows:

- Learners: partners
- Learning: active, augmented, personalised
- Knowledge: co-developed, refined and applied through collaboration
- Academics: partners, learners, enablers, leaders, mentors
- Teaching: adaptive, creative, context-sensitive
- Graduate-ness: leading to ethical, digitally-fluent, future-focused citizenship
- Technology: negotiated, intelligent, integrated and normalised
- Learning locations: purposeful, AI-enabled and diverse (Armellini, 2019).

As you consider the rest of the presentations from this conference, I would invite you to reflect on each of these categories for yourselves and consider what each of these might look like at your institution.

Challenges with Engagement

Finally, it would be remiss of me to finish this presentation without acknowledging some of the challenges that we have faced with student engagement. Under ABL, there is an expectation that the students come to class having engaged with the preparatory work, whether undertaken individually or collaboratively, and irrespective of the learning technology employed. But getting to a place where this is consistently occurring is an ongoing, and sometimes steep, learning curve. At Northampton, we are learning the value of being transparent about what we expect of our students and why and how we are adopting a particular pedagogic approach to a subject. Through a series of both small-scale and larger research projects, the primary lessons we have learned are:

- It is important to acknowledge the challenges of engagement from the outset – both with staff in any staff development workshops, and with our students. Some staff are directly contacting students in an attempt to seek to improve their engagement. Some students are choosing to engage strategically with their studies as a means of managing not only their academic workload, but also the other responsibilities they are balancing (work, family etc)
- Previous learning experiences matter. Students who have completed qualifications with a stronger emphasis on multiple, smaller pieces of coursework need a different type of support to those who have undertaken qualifications that rely on an end of programme exam. And this needs to be delivered in a way that doesn't send negative messages about any of the different qualifications.
- Our research is also identifying cultural variations in how students engage. Where there are cultural learning experiences that are heavily based on the apprentice/acolyte tradition, it takes longer for those students to think independently and work autonomously. Conversely, those students appreciate opportunities to reflect on their learning before contributing – something that is achieved through activities that offer increased processing time e.g. engaging with core content prior to responding, whether verbally or via discussion board, or through being able to ask questions anonymously, whether in-class via Barco, or on a discussion board that is set up to accommodate anonymous posts.
- Our research indicates that there are better personal relationships with the students as they are required to engage collaboratively in the face-to-face sessions rather than sit passively and try to absorb content.
- Demonstrating constructive alignment – the links between the stated learning outcomes, the learning and teaching activities and the assessment activities – not surprisingly has an impact on attainment and success. This is further enhanced by explaining the pedagogical approach to students – being clear about why you are doing what you are doing.
- Finally, understanding and articulating the added value of attendance and engagement has a similar impact as students can see what they can achieve over and above what they can achieve when working alone.

Conclusions

To summarise, in an active blended learning methodology:

- What matters is not the content per se, but what students do with it (sense-making) to achieve great outcomes. Content is not king. Context is.

- What matters is not the technology, but what students and staff do and create with it
- What matters is not the space, but how we use it
- The question is not 'does *x* work?' or 'should *x* be part of the campus of the future?', but 'how can we use *x* to enable students to benefit from an outstanding learning experience?

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