MAKING CONNECTIONS
WHANAUNGATANGA

PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2016 NATIONAL TERTIARY
LEARNING AND TEACHING CONFERENCE

3-5 OCTOBER 2016
ROTORUA, NEW ZEALAND

MAKING CONNECTIONS – WHANAUNGATANGA
PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2016 NATIONAL TERTIARY LEARNING AND TEACHING CONFERENCE

Creating connections between theory and practice for diverse learners

Naomi G. Lorimer, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland
Email: nlorimer@unitec.ac.nz

Nikki A. Hurst, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland
Email: nhurst@unitec.ac.nz

Courtney J. Rowe, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland
Email: crowe@unitec.ac.nz

Lucy L.M. Patston, Unitec Institute of Technology, Auckland
Email: lpatston@unitec.ac.nz

For students entering public service fields, such as healthcare and social services, a key skill is the ability to both learn and understand the theoretical underpinnings of their profession and to apply them appropriately in practice (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). The Human Development course described in this article is taught using a highly-blended model, with limited face-to-face time, where most feedback is provided online in written format. The students are from programmes as diverse as medical imaging, nursing, coaching and social practice, with a range of educational backgrounds, expectations, and future goals. This paper outlines the process of transitioning this course from a generic, theory-based course, to one where students create connections between their lived experience and theory, and between theory and professional practice. This was achieved through a combination of innovative teaching practices, drawing on the experiences of students and current practitioners, and creating connections between historical and more recent theories of human development.

Introduction

Professional training caters for diverse populations, including school leavers, second chance learners and adults seeking to change career. Crafting first year courses that cater to the needs of these students is critical for student success and retention (Kift & Moody, 2009; Mercier, 2016; Nelson, Kift, & Harper, 2005). This is particularly the case for courses with a more theoretical focus, where connection to practice is not immediately obvious, as student perceptions of the relevance of the material to their personal career goals is crucial for engagement (Kift & Field, 2009).

Blended learning has recently been identified as an effective strategy for catering to diverse learners by providing opportunities to access their learning community at any time and in any location (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Wicks, Craft, Mason, Gritter & Bolding, 2015). This is of particular value for students contending with external commitments (such as work, family and / or child care) in conjunction with study. Definitions of 'blended learning' are typically very broad. The blend can range from primarily face-to-face learning experiences, with few online tasks, to predominantly online learning with few face-to-face interactions (Graham & Allen, 2009; Kerres & De Witt, 2003). Within any blend, practitioners may use a range of teaching and learning strategies, ranging from traditional lectures through to more active approaches, such as workshops, laboratories, and work or project-based learning. Team-based learning and flipped classrooms take this pedagogical approach further by encouraging students to explore a pre-reading or recorded lecture before class, so that class time can be used to test, explore, debate and apply theory to professionally relevant scenarios with the support of peers and teaching staff (Saliba, Rankine & Cortez, 2013).

It is increasingly recognised that it is not the ratio of face-to-face to online work, nor the teaching and learning strategies used, but the *thoughtful* integration of these activities into a coherent structure that determines the value of blended

learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Graham & Allen, 2009; Jeffrey, Milne, Suddaby & Higgins, 2012). When designed well, blended learning has the potential to produce courses tailored precisely to students' personal and professional needs, with strong connections between theory and practice. This leads to increased connectivity, engagement and deeper overall student learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Hawkins, 2014).

Professional training typically involves student participation in placement programmes or practical arenas where they are expected to act professionally and apply theoretical concepts to real world situations. Wrenn and Wrenn (2009) explain that students often struggle to create the connections between theory and practice necessary to achieve these goals. They suggest that educators can help reduce this disparity through providing opportunities for explicit and meaningful application of theoretical concepts to practical scenarios during class (Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009).

Graduates also need to develop the ability and self-awareness to 1) effectively acquire, and critically engage with, resources to inform their practice, 2) build and maintain effective relationships, and 3) reflect on their own thoughts and practice to ensure that they consistently act within the best interests of clients and society in general (Hays, 2015; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). Garrison and Kanuka (2004) suggest that these skills can be effectively developed through the combination of synchronous and asynchronous communication within blended learning environments. Students' ideas and beliefs can be challenged and built on by other individuals within a community of practice, in a safe environment, supported by teaching staff (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004).

This paper outlines the process of iteratively developing and improving a first semester (Level 5) Human Development course in response to student feedback, using the ideas outlined above. The goals of this process were to create clear connections between theory and practice, and to help students develop the professional skills needed for successful placement and employment in health-based professions.

The Early Days

In 2013, Unitec Institute of Technology launched the development of a "Common Semester" suite of four 15-credit 'core' courses for all Level 5 students enrolling in the (at that time) Faculty of Health and Social Sciences. The four courses were Enquiry and Communication, Anatomy and Physiology, Contemporary Issues in Aotearoa New Zealand, and Human Development. Human Development was taken up by six programmes. Participating courses ranged from specialised, technical programmes such as the Bachelor of Nursing and Bachelor of Health Science (Medical Imaging) to more generalised programmes such as the Bachelor of Sport and Bachelor of Health and Social Development. Simultaneously, an institute-wide initiative to deliver in a 'flipped and blended learning pedagogy' commenced.

The blended model used in the design of the Common Semester courses was built predominantly around online learning. Face-to-face time consisted of weekly one-hour virtual classroom tutorials using Blackboard Collaborate, 'drop-in' face-to-face sessions and monthly large-scale, seminar-like events. In Human Development, the blend also included individual activities intended to help students find lower-order information about specific theories, and collaborative activities requiring higher order thinking, that students completed in set groups on Google Documents. Staff provided specific, asynchronous feedback to these documents on a weekly basis. It was thought that this approach would enable teams of 2.0 FTE to deliver to 300+ students, but it was soon apparent that this ratio limited the ability of staff to provide effective, regular feedback for the online asynchronous learning activities. This led to an increase in staff teaching allocation and the implementation of fortnightly, alternating face-to-face classes and online synchronous teaching (Blackboard Collaborate tutorials). During each semester in which Human Development was delivered, student feedback was obtained at six weeks and at the end of the semester. This feedback was used to identify the most pressing issues for students taking the course, and in response, solutions were explored and implemented as soon as possible. Each of the

following sections outlines an identified issue, solutions that were implemented in response, and the effect of these solutions on student learning.

Connecting Content with Pathways

The Human Development course was originally designed to be very generic, in order to avoid overloading students with content that was relevant to only one or two participating programmes. It was believed that the material itself would inspire students to create their own connections between the concepts and their future professions. In Semester 1, 2015, the key theme that arose from course evaluations was a perceived disconnect between course content and its relevance to future pathways. In hindsight, this was unsurprising, as these students had not yet engaged with programme-specific learning, and were seeking to relate the content to their personal interpretations of what the profession would entail.

As perceived lack of relevance to future career goals is a strong contributor to reduced student engagement (Kift & Field, 2009), this was deemed a critical issue. Consultation with staff from participating programmes identified the specific needs of students entering each discipline, and course content was modified accordingly. As this increased the volume of material in the Human Development course, an information panel was added to each activity. This panel briefly identified the programmes for whom that material was *most* relevant, with professionally informed justification. This helped students make informed decisions on which aspects of the Human Development course to focus on. Staff from each programme were also asked to identify life stages and developmental theories of particular importance to their students, and were invited to produce a short video where these ideas were discussed in the context of the pathway programme.

Māori staff members were also invited to record short talks on Māori developmental ideas such as the *Tuakana-Teina* model. The videos were uploaded to the relevant units of the Human Development course, reinforcing connections between culture, pathways and course content

(Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009). Students valued these videos, identifying "*lecture videos*" as one of the top four features of Human Development that most helped their learning, commenting that the videos explained the content material "*better*".

The social and ethnic diversity of the students encouraged the Human Development team to increase the diversity of the social and cognitive theories covered. Although core European theorists continued to be incorporated, several (e.g., Freud) became optional activities for interested students, or were used as a precursor to more recent theorists (e.g., Erikson as an introduction to Marcia). Programme staff and industry experts also helped to identify local theories of particular relevance such as Tupuola's (2004) *Edgewalking* model of Pasifika adolescent identity formation and the University of Auckland's Growing up in New Zealand longitudinal study (Growing Up in New Zealand, n.d.). A student also alerted a Human Development staff member to a study by the University of Auckland's Te Arai team on Māori end of life care, providing links to information about the research and permission to include the video she produced whilst participating in the study. Drawing on the expertise and experience of such a diverse group of people led to a more student-centred approach, with increased relevance to participating programmes. This was in contrast to the original, isolated attempts by the Human Development team to identify generic models and examples that were perceived to be relevant to all six programmes.

Connecting theory, assessment, student lives and future practice

To improve the connection between theory, assessment and practice, and to meet the graduate profile requirement of developing 'reflective practitioners', the focus of the Human Development course needed to change from information gathering to analysis and application (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). Many of the original activities were built around lower-order thinking, with students collecting and reproducing details about specific theories. The changing focus sought to develop students' ability to draw together concepts from multiple topics to explore potential

causes, effects and solutions to professionally relevant, 'real-life' problems.

Changes to the first assignment were informed by the theoretical foundations of the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education, both of which use Durie's (1985) Whare Tapa Wha model as a conceptual basis for practice. The assignment originally asked students to outline the key elements of one western learning theory (i.e., Pavlov, Skinner, or Bandura). This task was substantially altered, becoming a task built around Cope and Kalantzis' (2009) approach of asking students to reflect on theory in relation to their own lives – in this instance Durie's (1985) Te Whare Tapa Wha model. The task also asked students to produce a visual representation of the relationship between their own lives and Durie's model (Cope & Kalantzis, 2009). The work produced by students was highly creative and produced more effective learning, evidenced by students being more likely to refer to the model accurately and with greater relevance than in previous iterations of the Human Development course.

The second, major assignment had originally involved direct application of individual theories to short, specific case studies that were tailored to the theory in question. Due to the narrow range of each case study, demonstrating knowledge from across the Human Development course required students to submit four of eight assignment options. Feedback from students suggested that this approach did not produce the breadth or depth of learning that was needed. The assignment was redeveloped using Cope and Kalantzis' (2009) concept of multiliteracies and concepts of synthesis. The new assignment asked students to use a biopsychosocial approach to select and apply multiple theories to a case study focused on a specific life stage. Students were encouraged to explore the case study most relevant to their programme pathway, but were free to choose any of the four life stages available for assessment. Submission was in the form of a report that explained and applied the relevant theory to the events in the case study, followed by an audio or video recording of a simulated face-to-face (or phone-based) interaction with an imaginary client.

Markers and moderators of this assignment were impressed by the quality of work produced by the students, and the connectivity to their lives and future practice that came through in the verbal pieces. They made comments such as:

> *"You can hear these guys as future practitioners...the consideration for the clients coming through…" (Marker)*

> *"This approach allows students to include their lived experience...students who have asked their Kuia for advice are able to include this in an effective and real way." (Moderator)*

The moderator's comments reinforced the view of Rust (2002) and Mercier (2016) that this approach provided students with the opportunity to demonstrate professional skills and strengths that are not valued in typical essay-based tasks. Course staff also observed that more students were staying behind after class, arranging appointments with staff, and engaging in complex, collaborative conversations with one another around the case studies.

Connecting teaching and assessment

The analytical and application skills required for the second assignment needed to be explicitly taught to students. This was primarily facilitated through asynchronous, online discussion activities. These were migrated from Google Documents to myPortfolio, to improve ease of access. The activities were also rewritten as case studies specific to the related topic and containing issues that might be encountered in future professional situations. Each case study included a set of questions that indicated the concepts and issues that students needed to consider in order to reach an effective decision in response to the case study. The cases were deliberately controversial, with no clear 'right' answer. Students were encouraged to choose a perspective, and support it using evidence from theory and life experiences. They were also encouraged to comment on other students' arguments. Students could contribute as often as they wished to the online discussions, with a 100-word limit for each entry. This reduced staff

workload in terms of reading and responding to student content, and provided more time for detailed, focused feedback. The reduced verbosity also increased the attention that students paid to others' contributions, subsequently leading them to give one another more specific and relevant feedback.

Student evaluations of the online activities were very positive, with most students (87%) confirming that the case studies helped them to make connections between the material and their future practice. Additionally, 77% of students now agreed that the myPortfolio activities were "*somewhat*" or "*really interesting*". Within another cohort, half of the students surveyed said that the activities were "*Interesting*" and that they "*Encouraged them to think more deeply about the topic*". A smaller proportion of this cohort also felt that the activities "*Encouraged them to share their ideas with the group*". These findings were consistent with Garrison and Kanuka's (2004) suggestion that asynchronous challenges to thoughts and beliefs can help develop critical thinking and reflective skills. Asynchronous communication alone, however, is insufficient to support this development (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). A change in face-to-face pedagogical practice was also required.

Bringing it all together

The Human Development course was originally developed with the intention that students complete a series of activities about a topic, followed by a fortnightly 'drop-in' session where they could work together with staff and other students to apply ideas and ask questions. Poor attendance and negative student feedback, however, led to 'drop-ins' being replaced with fortnightly face-to-face, structured classes. Unfortunately, following this modification student feedback rapidly indicated that the return to a more traditional face-to-face teaching approach had not met their needs, with a number of students commenting that "*coming to class… [was] just repeating the content from Moodle*" or that it was "*very frustrating to have done all the work…only to attend class and redo it*". In response to this feedback, team-based learning provided an ideal foundation for restructuring the face-to-face classes, as it provided a means to specifically focus class time on material that was poorly understood by students. It also has the benefit of developing professional communication and problem solving skills, scaffolding students into online activities and assignments, and applying theory to practice (Hawkins, 2014).

Using a 'flipped classroom' approach, students were provided with activities to complete online each week, followed by a short quiz in Moodle for completion before class. The quizzes informed teaching staff, in advance, of the aspects of Human Development theory that students were less confident with. This information was used to guide teaching during the hour-long virtual classes and the first half of each face-to-face class. As a result, staff could focus teaching time on providing additional information, facilitating group discussions and fielding questions around more difficult topics.

The second half of the face-to-face classes was more applied and involved discussion of scenarios that drew on material covered during the previous week. For each scenario, groups had in-class time to research and discuss a possible solution. Students from two groups were then randomly selected to present their solution to the class for further discussion or students were asked to move around the room exploring other groups' answers. Limiting the number of students being called upon maintained student engagement, while random selection of students for presentation meant that all group members needed to actively participate in the discussion, understand the material at hand and the reasoning behind the group's conclusions (Hawkins, 2014). A series of trials using this approach were carried out, with very positive responses: 83% of students found the class '*more*', or '*somewhat more*', interesting than before, and 79% of students thought that this approach was '*more*' or '*somewhat more*' effective for their learning than before. Students also commented that the interactive nature of the class was more appealing and relevant to their future careers than the more traditional didactic approach.

Conclusions and future steps

The changes made to the Human Development course improved student opinion and engagement, and clearly enhanced the connection between theory, assessment and practice. Each change, however, revealed its own challenges and opportunities for further improvement.

Students appreciated the use of videos, but short, specific clips with clear links to their future professions were preferred. If videos are to be used as engaging learning tools, the presenter needs to be able to identify and clearly articulate fundamental concepts, and clearly relate them to professional practice, using appropriate anecdotes.

There is a need to increase the range of literacies being catered to during out-of-class activities. Instead of Human Development staff being responsible for finding and evaluating all course resources, evidence suggests that staff could benefit from recognising and drawing on learners' strengths and experiences. This could be in the form of learning activities that scaffold students through the process of identifying personal knowledge gaps, and going on to find, appraise and share the resources that most effectively support their specific learning needs.

Whilst students produced extraordinary work for their second assignment, some students mistakenly submitted only the spoken or the written piece. This reinforced the need for clear, unambiguous instructions and better scaffolding of assessment tasks. Kift and Moody (2009) suggest that a portfolio of work built from a 'patchwork' of small, applied activities could meet the needs of first year students more effectively than large single submissions. This approach fits well with the learning that the second assignment sought to assess, and has been incorporated into recommendations for future course changes.

Creating clear connections between lived experience, theoretical approaches and students' future goals resulted in clear gains in student engagement and attitudes toward the Human Development course. But *truly* thoughtful integration of face-to-face and online learning experiences requires an ongoing process of change,

with each modification prompting further research and rethinking of the teaching and learning paradigms being employed. Given the benefit to students it is hoped that teachers will continue to, and, if not already, embark on this reiterative methodology.

References

Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2009). "Multiliteracies": New literacies, new learning. *Pedagogies: An International Journal, 4*, 164-195. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15544800903076044

Durie, M. (1985). A Maori perspective of health. *Social Science and Medicine*, *20*(5): 483-486.

Garrison, D. R., & Kanuka, H. (2004). Blended learning: Uncovering its transformative potential in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education, 7*, 95-105. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2004.02.001

Graham, C. R., & Allen, S. (2009). Designing blended learning environments. In Rogers, P.L. (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of distance learning* (2nd ed., pp 562-570). http://dx.doi.org/10.1000/182

Growing Up in New Zealand. (n.d.). *Official website.* Retrieved from http://www.growingup.co.nz/en.html

Hawkins, D. (2014). Rationale and method for developing team-based learning education. In: D. Hawkins (Ed.), *A team-based learning guide for faculty in the health professions*. (pp. 1-10). Bloomington, UK: Author House.

Hays, J.M. (2015). Chaos to capability: Educating professionals for the 21st Century. *Unitec ePress Monograph Series*. Retrieved from http://www.unitec.ac.nz/epress/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Chaos-to-Capability_Educating-Professionals-for-the-21st-Century.pdf

Jeffrey, L. M., Milne, J., Suddaby, G., & Higgins, A. (2012). *Strategies for engaging learners in a blended environment.* Wellington, New Zealand: Ako Aotearoa.

Kerres, M., & De Witt, C. (2003). A didactical framework for the design of blended learning

arrangements. *Journal of Educational Media, 28*, 101-113. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1358165032000165653

Kift, S.M., & Field, R.M. (2009) Intentional first year curriculum design as a means of facilitating student engagement: Some exemplars. In: *12th Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference. "Preparing for tomorrow today: The first year experience as foundation." Conference Proceedings*, 29 June - 1 July 2009, Townsville, Australia.

Kift, S.M., & Moody, K. (2009). Harnessing assessment and feedback in the first year to support learning success, engagement and retention. In *ATN Assessment Conference 2009 Proceedings*. RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Li, X. (2013). Learning from industry by using an inquiry based learning approach. *Proceedings of the IEEE Frontiers in Education Conference*, 943-949. doi: 10.1109/FIE.2013.6684967

Mercier, J. (2016). Embedding positive youth development into tertiary learning and teaching. In H. Hamerton and C. Fraser (Eds.), *Te tipuranga – Growing capability: Proceedings of the 2015 National Tertiary Learning and Teaching Conference* (pp. 27-34). Tauranga, New Zealand: Bay of Plenty Polytechnic.

Nelson, K. J., Kift, S. M., & Harper, W. E. (2005). Any portal in a storm? Aligning online engagement patterns with the needs of transition students. In *OLT 2005, Beyond Delivery*, 27 September 2005, QUT, Brisbane, Australia.

Rust, C. (2002). The impact of assessment on student learning: How can the research literature practically help to inform the development of departmental assessment strategies and learner-centred assessment practices? *Active learning in higher education*, *3*, 145-158.

Saliba, G., Rankine, L., & Cortez, H. (2013). Fundamentals of blended learning. *University of Western Sydney*. Retrieved from: https://www.uws.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/467095/Fundamentals_of_Blended_Learning.pdf

Tupuola, A-M. (2004). Pasifika edgewalkers: Complicating the achieved identity status in youth research. *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, *25*, 87-100. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07256860410001687045

Wicks, D.A., Craft, B.B., Mason, G.N., Gritter, K., & Bolding, K. (2015). An investigation in the community of inquiry of blended classrooms by a Faculty Learning Community. *Internet and Higher Education, 25,* 53-62. http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2009.10.007

Wrenn, J., & Wrenn B. (2009). Enhancing learning by integrating theory and practice. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education, 21*, 258-265.