

## Of waves and storms: Supporting colleagues adopting blended approaches in their teaching

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### **Abstract:**

*In this personal reflection, the author describes the case of a university requiring teaching academics to increase the amount of blending they use in their teaching, and the approaches he took as a Director of Learning and Teaching, to support them. The author begins by providing a simple, wave-shaped model of the change process and reflects on his own experiences of embracing blended approaches to teaching and learning. He also draws upon his previous experience as a Loss and Grief Educator in a palliative care service and shares a model he used in his educative work that is based around a metaphor of a grieving person being like someone in a boat in a large storm. According to this model, the waves, winds and fog occurring in storms are linked to the emotional, cognitive and behavioural changes that academics might be experiencing as they move through a major change process. The author concludes that the two models that he has described may be of benefit to Directors of Learning and Teaching who might not always have frames of reference that support colleagues as they progress through change.*

### **Key Words:**

Universities, academic leaders, super-complexity, innovations, blended learning, change processes, emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses, loss and grief. frames of reference

### **Introduction**

Academics who teach in universities have a variety of responses to the requirements of their institutions to introduce blended approaches to their teaching—some embrace it; some initially resist it and in time begin to use it; some do the minimum required of them, and some might ignore the requirement altogether.

Part of my responsibilities as a Director of Learning and Teaching (a designation equivalent to Associate Dean in other institutions) in a College of Education in an

Australian university for the past four years was to support student learning via a shift to incorporating blended approaches to teaching and learning. My purpose in this reflection is twofold: first, to consider the challenges that confront academics in a university as they are required to move to blended learning; and second, to consider how having insights into change as a process, and of individuals' likely emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses to major change events, could be used to inform academic leaders as they work with academics through inevitable change events. In doing so, I shall rely on two models that I have found valuable to inform my own work.

'Blended learning' is a shorthand term that refers to an approach to teaching and learning that incorporates a blend of face-to-face and digitally-enabled learning opportunities for students. A move to blended learning, according to Garrison and Vaughan (2008, p. 164), "precipitates rethinking teaching and learning approaches in higher education". Importantly, blended learning is much more than simply delivering old content in a new medium (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Blended approaches have the potential to provide students with control over the time, place and space of their learning, and for teaching academics to think differently about how and why they teach the way they do.

Even though one of the most-commonly cited reasons for blending is to introduce more-effective pedagogical practices, there are several categories of blending that can be considered, with enabling blends, which focus on issues of access and convenience at one end of a continuum, to transforming blends at the other (Graham, 2012). Transforming blends, Graham explains, require increased intellectual activity leading to radical changes to the way that teaching and learning occurs. The University had published a set of enabling, minimum standards for academics to follow when teaching their online components. It was left to academics to determine whether they would make small, incremental changes to their pedagogical practices, or attempt something more far-reaching and daring, which would have been closer to the transformational end of the continuum as described by Graham (2012).

Innovations that require the adoption of new technology and consequent professional learning to implement the new technology, such as the shift to blended approaches being described in this reflection, require a shared meaning if they are to be adopted and assimilated into an organisation (Fullan, 2007; Fixsen et al., as cited in Pelliccione & Broadley, 2010). As a Director of Learning and Teaching, I could see that the requirement for academics to move from face-to-face teaching to blended teaching was not introduced around a shared understanding of either the problem to be solved, or the solution proposed. As a consequence, for many academics what they were confronting and anticipating was a series of losses, including a loss of certainty and security, a loss of control, and a loss of their academic identity. Personal losses such as these and the associated anxiety are common experiences in all moments of change (Pelliccione & Broadley, 2010). The unrelenting conditions of conceptual overload typify the continual demands on academics to innovate as universities seek ways to survive in the current era and have the potential to cause academics to experience a sense of emotional insecurity, which Barnett (2000) considers is a consequence of working in a university in an age of super-complexity.

Jaffe and Scott's (2012) Change Curve provides a means of understanding the change process, and can help individuals make sense of their attempts and successes

in responding to change events. In their model, Jaffe and Scott overlay a four-square grid onto a wave shape (a u-shaped trough between two crests). They argue that change occurs through a series of four phases, therein signalling a change from the old to the new. According to Jaffe and Scott, this usually happens in sequence, though it does not mean that each individual necessarily moves through the phases in order, with individuals sometimes returning to a previous phase or 'becoming stuck' in one phase. However, they stress that regardless of the different patterns that individuals might experience, they must eventually reach the final phase if they are to function effectively within the changed organisation.

Jaffe and Scott (2012) explain that responses to the change process commence with *denial*, in the top left-hand corner of their Change Curve. In this phase, individuals are effectively in shock and act as though neither they nor their workplace is going to change. The individual's focus is on the external situation as they hold onto their own past practices. Gradually, for most people, in a phase referred to as *resistance* (represented in the bottom left-hand corner), there is a realisation that change will happen. This typically triggers feelings—potentially deeply emotional—such as anger, anxiety, self-doubt and a sense of threat, all of which are internalised feelings. For many, reaching the end of this phase may represent a threat to their sense of self.

Then, something changes for most individuals. Here, in the bottom right-hand corner of the model, Jaffe and Scott (2012) explain that individuals typically enter a phase of *exploration*. Individuals stop fighting the change and begin to ask how they and others can make it work. In this period of “constructive commotion”, the individual exercises high levels of activity (emotionally, cognitively, behaviourally), experimenting and discovering how they might function in the future. The final phase of *commitment*, in the top right-hand corner, represents a sense of mastery of working in new ways where the focus shifts from thinking about their own wellbeing towards to the new external situation (typically their workplace). Ultimately, individuals find themselves once more feeling comfortable with their lot...until the next change event.

I would like to share a consideration of my own transformational journey in relation to a move to blended learning to illustrate how the Change Curve advanced by Jaffe and Scott (2012) can be understood. At a previous university where I was employed as a teacher educator, the dean of the Faculty of Education encouraged academics to blend as many subjects as possible to capitalise on the different study preferences of a new generation of students. My initial reaction was to say, “That’s never going to happen”, and that it was just a ‘flavour of the month’ that would soon pass - very much a case of *denial*. When it was clear that this suggestion was not going to go away, I found myself railing against the proposition, questioning how teachers could prepare for the rigors of classroom teaching via a mostly online delivery. I concluded that the change could not possibly progress for I could not see the reason for the change, nor was I convinced about the argument about the change in learners’ preferences. I dismissed the idea as being absurd and felt assured by other teacher educators around me that my stance was correct. This accords with the phase of *resistance*.

Notwithstanding this public stance, I certainly felt a sense of personal threat—a threat that I would not be equipped with enough skills to teach in this way if this were to become the way of university teaching. I listened with scepticism to the reassuring and encouraging words expressed by educational designers employed by the Faculty to

progress the changes. I found myself reflecting on my thirty-five successful years as a teacher in a range of settings (primary and special schools, workplaces, prisons), as I continued to actively resist the change and can remember expending considerable negative energy in the process.

Unexpectedly, something occurred to me: I realised I was arguing from a position of ignorance! I did not really know what was involved in teaching either fully or partially online, yet I was nevertheless arguing against the proposition. This proved to be my turning point; my “learning moment” (Coffey, 2010, p. 157); my moment of transformative learning in which my problematic frame of reference transformed and I felt “emotionally able to change” (Mezirow, 2009, p. 22). I had begun the process of *exploration*.

In the course of learning about online teaching, I quickly came to realise—even more-so than what I had realised in other curriculum development work I had undertaken—the importance of the alignment between the intended learning outcomes, the teaching and learning activities, and the assessment tasks (Biggs & Tang, 2007). Like many academics, I sought some sort of theoretical model or framework that might inform my online practices. After some time I found a framework, the *Seven Principles of Good Practice* (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996), which augmented the *Principles of Learning and Teaching P-12* (Department of Education and Training, 2013), that I had previously used as a framework to guide my social constructivist approaches to teaching.

As I was responsible for teaching a postgraduate subject to teachers who were already qualified teachers, I decided to deliver every part of the subject fully online. This was not a blended subject, because there was no face-to-face contact at all, but I figured that teaching the subject fully online would assist me to appreciate what was involved from a teaching perspective as well as appreciating what the experience might be like for the students. Importantly, I was not alone in this activity, as I had invaluable support from an educational designer, who was available to assist me when I needed it.

I did not find it a challenge to think of ways of encouraging contact between the students and myself, or to encourage cooperation amongst students on the online platform. Encouraging active learning, as Chickering and Ehrmann (1996) suggest, initially posed itself as a challenge, but in situations like this when feeling stuck or not being quite sure how to proceed, I reflected on how I would approach a situation like setting up group work in a face-to-face setting to guide me when doing group work in a virtual classroom. As Pelliccione and Broadley (2010) have observed, people tend to link new experiences to something with which they are more familiar, so that the approach I found myself taking was likely to be a fairly common one. Utilising the assistance and support of an educational designer, I was able to bring these ideas to fruition, and subsequently published the experience of teaching the subject at a virtual conference (Keamy, 2010).

Admittedly, I had gone a little overboard to discover for myself what the teaching online component of a blended approach could be like. With these experiences to learn and reflect upon, I found myself being able to commit to the idea of being able to teach in a blended fashion, albeit with a few provisos. I had invested considerable positive energy in the exploration phase trialling different approaches to teaching fully online so

that I would be able to speak with insight, rather than adopting a stance based on ignorance. Mixing teacher-led and student-focussed pedagogical approaches is as applicable in the virtual classroom as it is in the physical classroom so that learners are engaged in meaningful ways (Northcote, 2008), though I concluded that some topics and activities are better suited to face-to-face rather than online.

Jaffe and Scott's (2012) Change Model assists me to understand the change process, but a second model, one developed by Graham Fulton (1989, as cited in Morawetz, 2010), helps me to understand my own and others' responses to losses that are a consequence of change events. Fulton's Model of the Normal Grief Storm is something that I had drawn upon frequently when working as a Loss and Grief Education in a palliative care service, mainly because it provided a visual representation for people and because it provided some readily-understandable points of connection for them. Fulton's Model utilises a metaphor of a person in a small boat trying to survive a violent storm, with the boat being tossed around by massive waves and potentially being blown off course. Occasionally as well, fog descends on the sea. Fulton ties the typical emotional, cognitive and behavioural responses that people have to a loss, to storm phenomena, ending up with three powerful devices to assist understanding: Waves of Emotion (such as disbelief, denial, fear and anxiety); Winds of Disturbed Behaviour (such as an inability to concentrate, agitation, and withdrawing into the self), and Fog of Disturbed Thought Processes (such as disorientation, vagueness and preoccupation).

When introducing Fulton's model to people when I worked as a Loss and Grief Educator, I would pose a question about how the person in the boat might be supported. Responses such as 'pull alongside in a boat and ask them if they need help', 'wait until they radio the lighthouse seeking assistance', and 'sit it out and wait until the storm passes and sunny skies return', were amongst the most common. Years later, and in my role as a Director of Learning and Teaching, the way that I was able to offer support for my academic colleagues certainly involved a lot of sitting and waiting until the "disorderly process" of change (Kezar, 2001, as cited in Childs et al., 2013) settled. For some colleagues, I simply sat next to them as I showed them how I had approached a particular problem. For others who preferred to work independently, I provided them with access to the learning spaces I had developed or ensured that they knew how to access the many resources provided by educational developers. Others considered the *Seven Principles of Good Practice* (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996) to inform, guide and inspire them. But by and large, the main support I could provide was akin to responding to the person in the boat radioing a nearby lighthouse: listening to colleagues' concerns and helping them reflect on their past experiences and beliefs about learning and teaching to help them transfer these insights to the new situation that confronted them (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2013).

Because of my prior teaching experience and my experience as a Loss and Grief Educator, I found that having an awareness of models of loss and grief has provided me with some useful tools to support colleagues—a mental mind-map to guide my interactions with them. In these concluding paragraphs, I consider the implications for academic leaders, such as Directors of Learning and Teaching, in supporting their colleagues through the change process, for a mistake that many academic leaders make is that they fail to anticipate or acknowledge the emotional struggles and

upheavals that changes can mean for individuals in their organisations (Jaffe & Scott, 1998). What can go unrecognised in a process of change are individuals' responses to, and anticipation of, losses that individuals might experience.

Directors of Learning and Teaching are well-positioned to assist the universities to which we belong through periods of continuous change, though they are not always well-equipped with the knowledge and skills – or time (Keamy, 2017) – required so that they can adjust quickly to the ever-changing landscape in our universities. To be effective leaders of learning and teaching in higher education, Directors of Learning and Teaching not only need to have up-to-date knowledge and skills, as Scott, Coates and Anderson (2008, p. xv) found, they need to be able to “empathise with and influence a wide diversity of people”.

Obviously, each Director of Learning and Teaching will bring to their role a variety of knowledge and skills and different levels of emotional intelligence upon which they will be able to draw to carry out their duties. These duties implicitly include ensuring that individuals who are experiencing change events are not ‘left all at sea’; Directors of Learning and Teaching have an important role in assisting colleagues to navigate their journey so that they might “survive and thrive” (Bradey, 2014). Whilst it would be naïve and arrogant of me to suggest that the frames of reference that I have developed are somehow more appropriate or worthier of consideration than the frames of reference of others, I hope that by sharing the two models that have guided me as I have supported colleagues through change events, this might prove insightful to Directors of Learning and Teaching as they reflect on how they approach their work. They might be of assistance to individuals themselves who are responding to the inevitable changes occurring in our universities.

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