

Distance education: strategies for maintaining relationships

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Abstract

Experience with Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in the Bachelor of Applied Health Science (BAppHSc) course suggests that one of the key elements for students is the sense of relationship built up through Problem Based Learning (PBL). Failure to retain students is more likely to be related to personal than academic concerns. The low attrition rate is largely attributed to the sense of community and support the course generates. In 1997, the Centre for Indigenous Health, Education and Research offered the BAppHSc to rural Queensland. Campuses were opened in the Torres Strait and Cairns, with 9 and 5 students respectively. The course consisted of PBL sessions, fixed resource sessions provided by local staff or guest lecturers, video-conferencing and the use of videos, or text. Face-to-face contact hours were concentrated into two blocks of one and two weeks respectively, plus one day per week. Course materials such as journal articles and texts were provided. The nine Torres students and three Cairns students completed the first semester.

This paper discusses the differences between the centres and examines strategies for maintaining the sense of relationship in distance education settings. In 1999 applications from other remote areas are challenging the model further. Multiple technologies are envisaged and discussed. In addition, similar methods are being applied to post graduate courses and collaboration with other institutions in the Pacific suggested. This would allow cross crediting of

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such course-work into a range of courses and institutions, reducing duplication and increasing options.

Introduction

The Bachelor of Applied Health Science (Indigenous Primary Health Care) was first offered at the University of Queensland's Herston campus in 1993. The course has been delivered over 3 years full time using a problem based curriculum, with the option of a fourth research based Honours year. Thirty-eight graduates have completed the degree, with four completing the Honours level. Despite the fact that all places are special entry places, selected on the basis of interview and evaluation testing, retention rates have been in excess of 90%.

Problem based learning and Aboriginal learning styles

Three quarters of the students are of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander origin. As well as other Australians, South Sea Islander, Maori, Tongan and Papua New Guinean students are represented among the remaining students. The development of the BAppHSc(IPHC) focussed on Problem Based Learning as the vehicle for teaching and learning because of an apparent fit with traditional learning styles in Aboriginal communities.

The PBL approach makes use of strong oral/verbal skills in exploring learning issues, while progressively building up writing skills as part of the evaluation process. It encourages the student to address the problem initially from their own experience, valuing the students' knowledge, and recognising the community as an important source of information. With an emphasis on collaboration rather than competition, learning benefits the group, as well as the individual. The collaborative nature of problem based learning generates positive vertical relationships with staff, and horizontal relationships with others in the student group, providing educational as well as social support. The sense of mutual obligation to a learning "community" provides an importance support network, and a counterbalance to other relationships which may distract from study. The scenarios themselves are realistic and

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"recognisable", giving life experience an important role, and the interactive cycle allows imitation, repetition and reinforcement of learning.

Experience suggests that one of the key elements in the support of students is the sense of relationship built up through the process of Problem Based Learning. Failure to retain students is more likely to be related to personal or family concerns than to straight academic issues. The high retention rates for the BAppHSc(IPHC) are largely attributed to this sense of community, and the support that it generates. In a study undertaken over the past three years, 67% of respondents (32/47) found PBL to be a source of academic support, with 55% (26/47) acknowledging it as a source of emotional and social support. While 53% (25/47) found PBL itself to be a source of stress during the academic year, only 8% (4/47) of respondents would prefer a course not using PBL, given the choice again.

Centre for Indigenous Health, Education and Research

In late 1997, the Centre for Indigenous Health, Education and Research was established by the Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education and Youth Affairs. The Centre is a collaboration between the University of Queensland and the Queensland University of Technology. It combines the Indigenous Health Program (UQ) and the Department of Social and Preventive Medicine, North Queensland Clinical School (UQ) and the Faculty of Health (QUT). The collaboration provides access to the full range of health professional education for Indigenous students, as well as extending the delivery of the BAppHSc(IPHC) to remote and rural Queensland.

Campuses were opened in the Torres Strait and Cairns, with nine and five BAppHSc(IPHC) students respectively. Local course facilitators were appointed, or staff seconded to new positions. Delivery of the course was through locally facilitated PBL sessions, with fixed resource sessions provided by local staff or guest lecturers, through videoconferencing or the use of videos, or using text. Face-to-face contact hours were concentrated into two blocks of two and one weeks, and one day per week. Internet access for Cairns students proved an important resource, and connections to Thursday Island and the Cairns offices are planned for 1999. The students are taking a three quarter full time load, completing the three year degree in four years. Course materials such as journal articles and texts have been copied and provided, as library access, while possible, is not responsive enough to meet the needs of responding to learning issues. The nine Torres students

and three Cairns students have successfully completed first semester.

For 1999, applications from Bamaga and the Outer Islands of the Torres Strait and Mount Isa have been received, further challenging the model of delivery, and creating a need to develop strategies that allow the sense of relationship to be maintained despite the distance. Building on our experience, a strategy of using multiple technologies is envisaged:

Recruitment strategies

The success of the Torres Straits Campus is built on strong local institutional support: both the community based Torres Strait Health Council and Queensland Health's Torres District have been vigorous in encouraging students to access the course, and in restructuring their work loads to accommodate this. Virtually all Torres students are employed by the Torres Health District. By contrast, only one student in Cairns was employed by the Queensland Health, and found she was unable to reconcile the program of study with her work commitments.

The provision of introductory courses allow the introduction of staff, and the establishment of relationship over a short, but intense exposure. It allows staff to evaluate potential students and to provide guidance or redirection where necessary, but also ensures realistic expectations of the course prior to enrolment. Short courses, conferences and in-service training are also valuable opportunities to encourage suitable appli-

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cants to consider the option of University education. To be effective, problem based learning needs a cluster of at least eight initial enrolments, and recruitment of clusters of students with existing social or professional links allows us to build on their existing relationships. In Cairns, the initial recruitment of five students has meant that even the withdrawal of one student had a profound impact on classroom dynamics and morale.

Course delivery strategies

Where the appointment of permanent staff has not been possible, the use of a local facilitator/tutor to ensure continuity has been important. The use of local expertise as teaching and learning resources has both gained their support, as well as ensuring excellent communication and understanding of student needs. Concentrated blocks of contact at the beginning and half way through the course allow remote staff to establish relationships that can be sustained through other means. Opportunistic visits are

important for teaching and reinforcement, and the combination of travel for research, teaching and project work makes staff travel more cost-effective overall. The program has made limited use of tele- and video-conferencing, and audiographic presentations are envisaged for use in the next future. Where internet access is possible, we have encouraged e-mail, and other Net contact for information retrieval. Net-access to our target areas will be significantly enhanced over the coming months, allowing greater flexibility of contact and data delivery.

The future

Staff are currently packaging existing courses in comprehensive hard copy text format, with the intention of conversion to Net-based program as access improves.

The use Net pages for Staff profiles, and making contact easier through on-line tutorials, chat pages and e-mail will also become feasible with these technological improvements. The final delivery is likely to combine both block and Net-based delivery, with a continuing use of local facilitators, either employed directly by the Centre, or in collaborating institutions. Collaboration with other educational providers in terms of joint course delivery and cross accreditation is crucial in a climate of diminishing resources.

Collaboration with other institutions in the Pacific would allow cross crediting of such course-work into a range of courses and institutions, reducing duplication and increasing options.

There is also an opportunity to optimise common course materials between upper undergraduate and early post-graduate courses. Identified areas of overlap currently include the social sciences, research methods, statistics and epidemiology, health services management and specialist health areas such as sexual health. At a post graduate level, the Australian Centre for International and Tropical Health and Nutrition is currently collaborating with the University of PNG on providing "sandwich" course work for their MPH students. A flexible delivery Post-Graduate Certificate in Public Health is currently being developed to allow access to remote and international students to "test" their interest in

post-graduate study. Collaboration with other institutions in the Pacific would allow cross crediting of such course-work into a range of courses and institutions, reducing duplication and increasing options.

References

Available from the author on request. •

Technology is just a tool. In terms of getting the kids working together and motivating them, the teacher is the most important.

Bill Gates, in Independent, Sunday 12 Oct 1997