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Strategies for large scale blended learning initiatives: Training, teaching and management

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Abstract Since 2003, the College of Fine Arts (COFA), The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia has successfully developed and implemented online learning and teaching training programs. In 2008, an increase of interest amongst the Faculty in the potential of blending learning, prompted COFA Online (COFA's elearning unit), to conduct a special Blended Learning Fellowship Training Program to support staff wishing to develop and implement their own blended learning curricula. This program was to serve as a pilot test before a wider implementation of blended learning strategies across the faculty. A total of 35 academics participated in the program, which comprised blended curriculum development, online teaching, and online class management techniques. A total of 11 blended courses across a range of programs and stages were developed, involving 1185 students. During the program and the teaching semester, comparative analysis of different courses in the program was conducted in the context of comprehensive evaluation data, and collegial discussion within the community of involved academics. Whilst the program was an overall success, revealing several effective blended learning strategies, it also highlighted several problematic issues relevant to any large-scale implementation of blended learning. In particular:

- The traditional roles and expectations of teachers and students were challenged, revealing particular adaptive difficulties shared by both groups
- Balance of workload and time management were key for both teachers and students
- The 'ripple effect' of blended learning upon academic management and administrative strategies must be anticipated to ensure this form of teaching integrates well with existing practice.

This paper discusses these issues and outlines what teachers, administrators and students can expect when adapting to a blended learning environment, and provides a solid foundation for further research into management, training and teaching issues surrounding large scale blended learning applications in tertiary institutions.

COFA Online Overview

COFA Online is an academic unit responsible for the development and management of a wide range of fully online and blended undergraduate and postgraduate courses in art and design disciplines at the College of Fine Arts, The University of New South Wales, Sydney Australia. COFA Online also specialises in the development and dissemination of online specific pedagogy and training through a series of specially designed Fellowship programs. Since 2003, these programs have assisted academic staff develop and teach around 15 blended and 60 fully online undergraduate and postgraduate units, a fully online global postgraduate degree, and various special projects. Fellowships are typically run over a number of months, and bring together academics and learning and teaching professionals in both face-to-face and online environments for sharing of ideas, experience and support. Special instruction is given on online curriculum development, teaching and collaborative learning management.

The Blended Learning Fellowship Program

Context

During early 2008, interest in blended learning in the COFA Faculty increased due to the growing acceptance of online learning as a legitimate and effective educational option in the broader academic community (*Goodyear & Ellis, 2007*), and word of mouth of from several academics within our fully online programs. When the program coordinators of the Faculty's Design and Media Arts programs

wished to implement more flexible blended learning options, it was decided to develop a tailored training program to bring involved academics together to work towards a common goal, rather than work in isolation. The *COFA Online Blended Learning Program*, based upon the format of previous Fellowships, was therefore designed to provide:

- a formalisation of the development of blended learning within the faculty
- a supportive community of practice for interested academics
- a lasting training infrastructure and an adaptable blended learning model for others to follow
- a pedagogy (opposed to technology) focused approach to blended learning
- an improved learning experience for students who participate in the blended projects.

Seventeen full time academic staff and eighteen casual tutors from the Schools of Design Studies, Digital Media and Art History and Education, took part in the pilot Blended Learning Fellowship Program.

Fellowship Structure

The Blended Learning Fellowship Program was conducted in three main phases: staff training, implementation of the blended units, and evaluation (Figure 1).

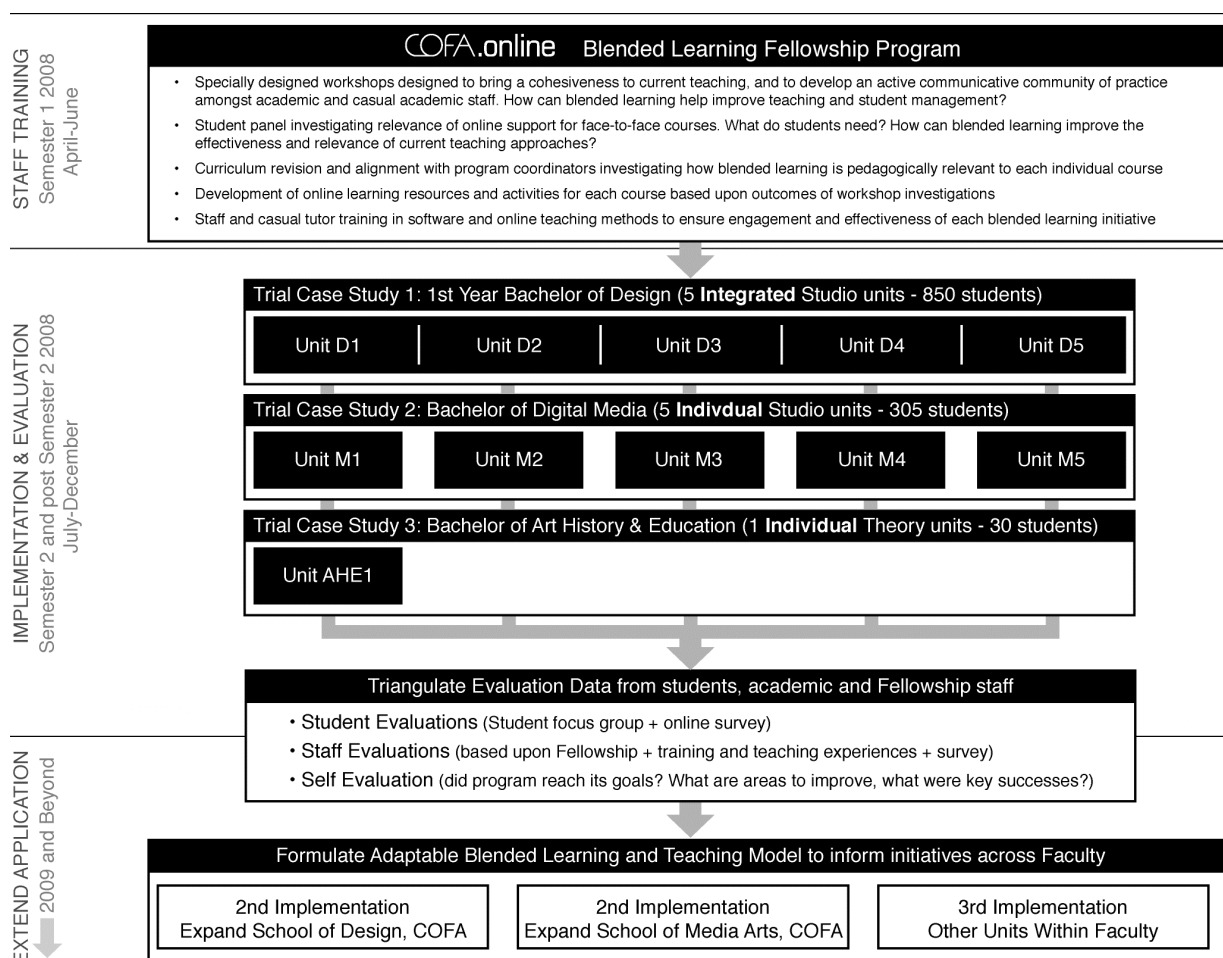


Figure 1 - Methodological approach of the Blended Learning Fellowship Program

As this was the first time such a program had been run at this scale, it was to act as a pilot study to help determine the most effective model of practice for a wider implementation of blended learning across the Faculty in the future. The Fellowship aimed to help academics unite the advantages of both face-to-face and online learning models to maximise:

- the efficiency of face-to-face studio/tutorial time

- constructive alignment (*Biggs 1999*) of learning outcomes and integrated projects across units within the same program
- interaction between students in different tutorial groups within units
- streamlined delivery and integration of course material with collaborative learning methods
- universal access to resources and administrative material
- sustainability of programs through the collection of a digital repository of lectures, notes and resources.

Fellowship Workshops

The Fellowship itself comprised a series of face-to-face workshops, supported by an online community in between meetings, where staff could upload developmental milestones, access resources and offer peer review. This blended approach was integral in offering the academics first hand experience using this model of teaching, and also gave them an appreciation of the student point of view. Initially, full time academics attended the first three workshops in order to adapt the curricula of their units to a blended learning format. Tutors were inducted in Workshop 3 before the start of semester, and all students were given an overview of the blended learning program and online learning environment at the start of semester. The workshops continued into Semester 2 so as to offer ongoing support and discussion for the academics. The workshop and activity structure can be summarised as below:

WORKSHOP 1 'Introduction – Inspirations and Suggestions' - May 2

Attendees: *Coordinators, Conveners and Student Panel*

- Introduction to Fellowship process
- Community of practice philosophy
- Roles and responsibilities
- Preconceptions/misconceptions about online learning
- Benefits of blended learning
- Suggestions by staff and students
- Expectations of coordinators, teachers and students
- Introduction to online learning environment
- Mapping out course structure
- Graduate attributes
- Issue Stage 1 evaluation to students

WORKSHOP 2 'Setting up, preparing and teaching your course' - May 30

Attendees: *Coordinators and Conveners*

- Course Schedules
- Constructive Alignment
- Online socialising
- Signposting, branding
- Academics commence uploading information

WORKSHOP 3 'Inducting Tutors' - June 27

Attendees: *Coordinators, Conveners, Tutors*

- Identify and coordinate administrative and housekeeping issues
- Coordinators to brief tutors on expectations and blended model
- Navigating website
- Issue evaluations to coordinators and conveners

WORKSHOP 4 'Induct students' - July 25

Attendees: *all participating students*

- Academics induct students to website
- Student workshop to introduce blended learning environment and discuss expectations

WORKSHOP 5 'Course Evaluation' – August 15

Attendees: *Coordinators, Conveners and Tutors*

- Feedback from tutors, coordinators, conveners
- Community of Practice - suggestions, sharing of information and experiences

- Monitor process
- Brief analysis of student feedback

WORKSHOP 6 ‘Reflection and Discussion’ – October 3

Attendees: *Coordinators, Conveners and Tutors*

- Evaluations of coordinators, tutors, conveners
- Community of Practice – suggestions, sharing of information and experiences
- Issue results online student evaluations
- Discuss issues that arose - suggestions on strategies for improvement
- What worked well during the session?

Evaluation of the Program

Worthy of note were the different ways in which the three Schools used blended learning in their units of study, and the varying number of students, teaching staff and tutorial groups involved in each unit (Table 1).

Table 1 Number of Staff and Students involved in the Blended Learning Fellowship Program

School	Lecturers	Tutors	Units	Av Tutes per Unit	Total Students
Design Studies (Integrated Studio)	9	14	5	7	850
Media Arts (Individual Studio)	7	4	5	2	305
Art History & Education (Individual Theory)	1	0	1	1	30
<i>Totals</i>	<i>17</i>	<i>18</i>	<i>11</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>1185</i>

This enabled a comparative analysis of training, teaching and managerial aspects surrounding the application of simple, intermediate and complex applications of blended learning.

Evaluation Methodology

There were three key elements of the pilot Blended Learning Fellowship Program that were evaluated:

- Effectiveness of the Fellowship
- Teaching experiences
- Student learning experiences

To ensure a comparative basis for analysis, data were gathered from different instruments at three key stages during the program, from students and teaching staff:

Stage 1: Pre Semester (Pre-blended learning)

- Student Survey 1 - Issued to all students to gauge level of student satisfaction with various aspects of their existing face-to-face units. Used as benchmark for post evaluation
- Student Focus Group - Representatives of the three Schools were brought together to discuss their expectations and preconceptions about blended learning
- Staff Focus Groups - Staff discussed their expectations and preconceptions of blended learning

Stage 2: Mid Semester

- Student Feedback - All students were given the opportunity to offer feedback within message boards in each unit. This was used to implement changes to the Fellowship training, and to offer direct feedback to teachers
- Staff Focus Group - Full time academics and casual tutors reflected upon positive and negative implementation and teaching issues during Workshop 5

Observation of Units - COFA Online observed participant interaction in individual units

Stage 3: Post Semester

Student Survey 2 - All students surveyed electronically. Questions were identical to Survey 1

Staff Survey - All teaching staff surveyed about their blended learning teaching and management experiences

Observation of Units - COFA Online observed participant interaction in individual units

Data from each stage were reduced and triangulated at the conclusion of the program in order to gain a more comprehensive picture of the project outcomes from both student and teacher perspectives.

Key Findings

Data analysis revealed some interesting, and unexpected issues. Overall the outcomes of the pilot program were quite positive. Data indicated that students considered the following aspects of the blended learning model effective and worthwhile:

- “Admin and resources did not take up valuable studio time”
(34% of students agreed in Stage 1: Pre Semester survey, and 79% of students agreed in the Stage 3: Post Semester survey)
- “Resources were delivered in a timely manner and are easily accessible”
(76% of students agreed in Stage 1, and 87% agree in Stage 3)
- “There was a sense of community amongst my peers studying the course”
(maintained at average of 72% agreed in both Stage 1 and 3)
- “I had opportunities to provide and receive peer review and support with other students”
(maintained at average of 77% agreed in both Stage 1 and 3)
- “Collaborating with other students has enhanced my learning experience”
(maintained at average of 75% agreed in both Stage 1 and 3)

Interestingly, it seemed that the blended learning model maintained, and did not increase the amount of collaboration and peer review amongst students. This may be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, that blended learning was not successful in *increasing* the levels of collaboration and a sense of community amongst students as was initially hoped by some academics (this may be explained by the more problematic implementation of the integrated units within the Design School as outlined later). On the other hand, blended learning did not *decrease* these levels. This challenges the often-held misconception amongst students and teachers that the introduction of an online component to their study will result in an alienating and impersonal experience (Aycock *et al* 2002).

Data suggested that overall students and teachers regarded the Fellowship Program as successful in:

- supplementing and improving individual units
- maximising the effective use of class time
- providing timely and efficient delivery of resources and material
- providing academic support to students
- maintaining the high sense of community, collaboration and peer review amongst students
- providing a good training and course development program for academics

However, the evaluation process also revealed several problematic issues surrounding the implementation phase. Interestingly, these issues seemed to be markedly more prevalent in the integrated Design School units than the stand-alone units of Media Arts and Art History and Education. By re-examining Table 1 above, it is clear to see that Design Studies units involved many more students, tutors and tutorial groups than both the Digital Media and Art History and Education units.

Another complicating aspect of the Design School units were that they were integrated as a larger program of study, meaning design students (and often lecturers) would participate in five blended units simultaneously, compared to other Schools that had individual based units of study.

Additional data analysis further exemplified this division of student experience. Design School students demonstrated a significantly lower level of student satisfaction in their impression of the value of the blended learning program (Figure 2), their feeling of connection to their tutors and peers (Figure 3), and the value of the online components of their study (Figure 4).

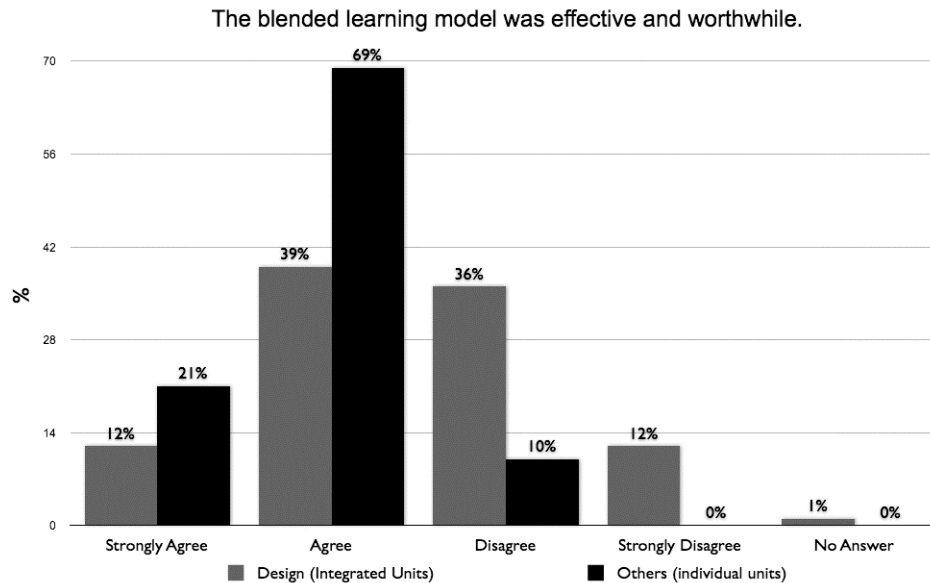


Figure 2 - Stage 3 student survey: perception of effectiveness and worth of the blended learning program – contrasted between Integrated Design and all other individual units

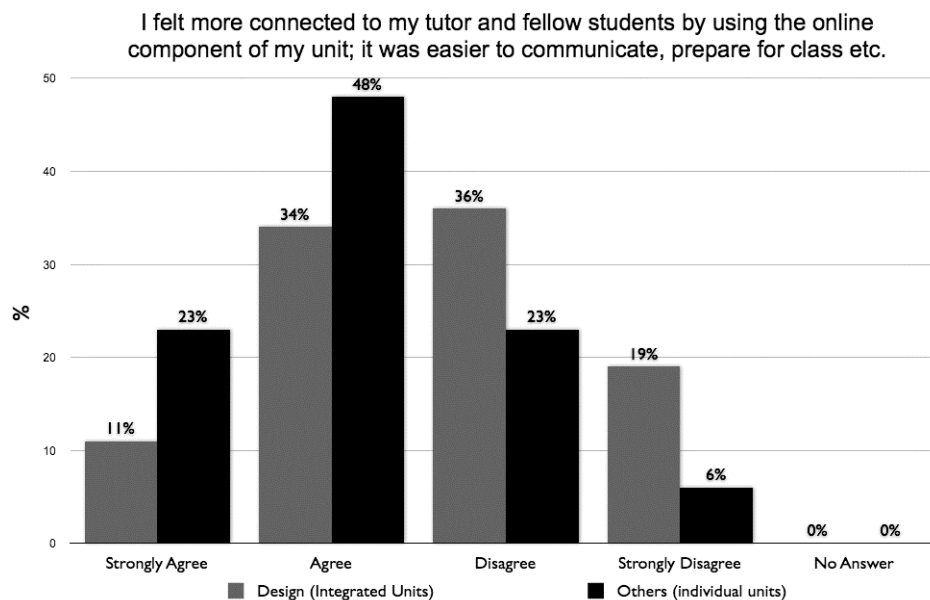


Figure 3 - Stage 3 student survey: personal connection with tutors and peers facilitated by online components of their study – contrasted between Integrated Design and all other individual units

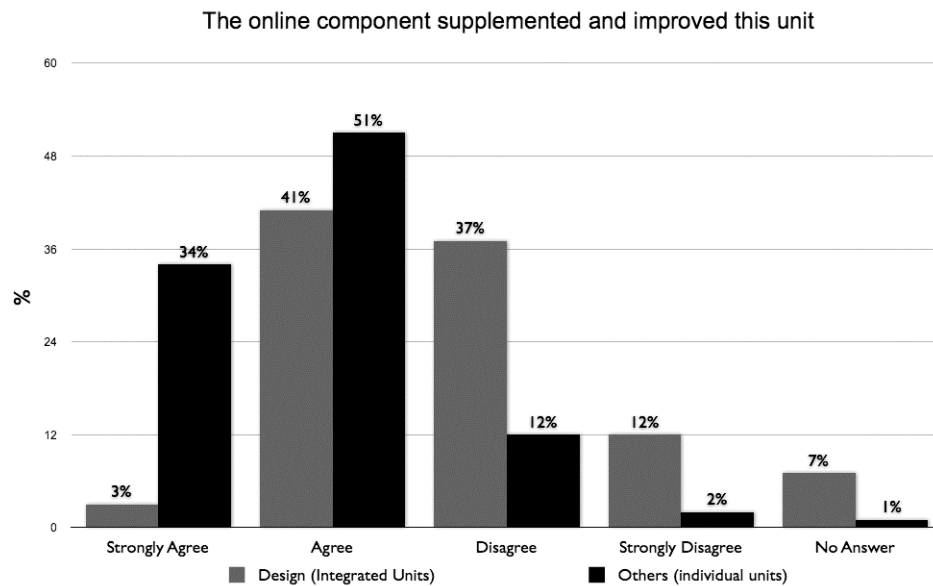


Figure 4 - Stage 3 student survey: did online components improve the unit? – contrasted between Integrated Design and all other individual units

Perhaps the following student quotes from the Stage 3 survey sum up the opposing student experiences from these different types of units:

"I cannot overestimate the value of being able to see other's work, especially from other classes. Having a clear and acceptable (and 24 hours) way in which to contact the tutor was also incredibly helpful, as was the fact that others could see the question and subsequent answer, as it often applied to them as well. Being able to get all the admin stuff out of the way, without having to take up valuable studio time was also fantastic! Having a link to further resources was also great" (Digital Media student).

Contrast with the following from the integrated Design program:

"This online blending was separate to face to face, didn't really feel it was integrated or relevant. It was hardly mention [sic] in class, and wasn't a thing that was encouraged." (Design Studies student).

When this contrasting student evaluation data was triangulated with the comments and survey results from the teachers, three key yet interdependent issues were revealed that were determined to be at the root of the problems:

- Traditional roles and expectations of teachers and students were challenged, revealing difficulties surrounding the adaptation to a blended learning model
- Balance of workload and time management was sometimes problematic for both teachers and students
- The 'ripple effect' of blended learning upon academic management and administrative strategies must be anticipated to ensure this form of teaching integrates well with existing practice.

Traditional Teaching Roles and Expectations Challenged

The complexity of the integrated units in the Design School highlighted a previously underestimated aspect of the blended learning program, and reinforced the importance of starting slowly and simply in the implementation of such models (Aycock et al 2002). In the more individual units, there was usually only one or two staff involved in its planning and teaching. In the integrated Design School units however, there were up to seven tutorial groups per unit, each connected to an academic 'chain of command': program coordinator, lecturers and tutors. The Design School program coordinator assumed responsibility for the integrated curricula design of all of the blended learning units in the Fellowship Program, with lecturers making contributions to content. It was revealed through the staff focus group in

Stage 2 of the evaluation process, and the staff survey in stage 3, that tutors who had the most contact with students in the classroom, were often not engaging fully with the online components. Where there was a longer chain of command, the tutors had not really received sufficient instruction prior to the commencement of the teaching semester from the program coordinator and the lecturers about the purpose of using a blended approach, nor what was expected of them in such a situation in time and teaching technique. Some tutors took the initiative and embraced it, while many continued to teach face-to-face as they had done before, using online aspects of the units differently to the other tutorial groups, and sometimes not even using them at all.

It became clear from discussions held with tutors in the final reflective workshop, that there was a feeling of 'rebellion' or anxiety within those who did not adopt the blended learning approach in their teaching. Their response that "face-to-face teaching had worked well so far, so why change it?" is not an uncommon attitude amongst higher education staff feeling uncomfortable with this new seismic shift (*Goodyear and Ellis, 2007*). This phenomenon has been well documented and usually stems from a lack of understanding of the pedagogy and benefits online learning can offer (*Walker and Johnson 2008*), as well as a resistance to organisational change in higher education (*Vaughan, 2007*). The data from our case study demonstrates that where the blended learning approach was positively adopted and there was clear communication and dissemination of information between program coordinators, lecturers and tutors, the students benefited, and both students and staff felt the experience was worthwhile.

This communication issue highlights a flaw in the Fellowship structure. Tutors were only brought into the workshops prior to the start of semester to become familiar with the blended structure and aims. Workshop 3, 'Inducting Tutors' was designed such that after technical demonstrations of the online learning environment, program coordinators were to discuss aims, structure and expectations of their blended units with their lecturers and tutors. However, only a small number of lecturers and tutors actually attended the workshop, and the program coordinators did not prepare material to effectively communicate this information as requested. Subsequent discussions with staff revealed that the main reason attendance was low at the workshop was because it was thought blended learning was outside of what should be expected of their teaching role (one Design lecturer appointed to coordinate the introduction of blended learning into one of his units completely refused to do so, passing the responsibility to his tutors to attempt unsupervised!).

Upon reflection it is apparent that the training program should have included input from the tutors right from the beginning, as of all those within the 'chain of command', they are ultimately responsible for teaching individual tutorial groups. This would have enabled them to take ownership of the initiative, and be able to more successfully tie in the blended components with their own teaching styles. It may also have helped to reduce the levels of miscommunication within the more complex curricula that contributed to this issue.

Balancing Workload and Time Management

The Stage 3 staff survey revealed several comments from full-time and casually employed teaching staff indicating that some of the tasks involved in the implementation of blended learning were outside the scope of their terms of employment, and that they were being asked to undertake extra work which they were not being paid for. It appeared to them that the blended aspects of the course were additional to the workload they expected, and not an integrated part of it.

In the units where the tutors had a closer working relationship to the lecturers in charge of preparing the blended curricula, they seemed to gain a more holistic understanding of the benefits and justifications for the blended approach. The goals had been more clearly communicated, and thus more effectively implemented within the usual teaching load and tutors were willing to put in the extra work for the long-term benefits. This highlighted the importance of allocating key staff (and an additional allocation of hours) to provide personal motivation and effective strategies to bring on board those staff members that were resistant to change, or that were not yet convinced of the benefits of the blended learning model (*Garrison and Kanuka 2004*). It must be acknowledged, that a unit using both face-to-face and online components can take more time to teach and study in its early stages. However, if online

components are well balanced with face-to-face components, and online tasks are well integrated with those of the classroom, this time can be substantially reduced (*Anderson 2003*).

As the session progressed, observations indicated that staff were becoming more comfortable with the blended learning format, with 83% of staff responding in the Stage 3 staff survey data that they would like to continue teaching in a blended learning environment.

Student perception of how much time they were spending online provided interesting results. Students generally do not perceive time spent in lectures as 'work', however they do perceive time spent online as work (*Aycock et al., 2002*). Discussions amongst Design School staff during Stage 2 revealed that some believed both staff and students were spending enormous amounts of additional time online each week.

"... At the moment the perception is of extra workload; for teachers and students alike."
(Staff member)

However, the data from the Stage 3 student survey indicated that the actual amount of time students spent online was far less than what they perceived. 51% of students spent between 0-2 hours online per week, with an additional 28% spending between 2-4 hours. This is well within the specified University allowance of nine hours of additional study for every three hours face-to-face contact. This highlights the need to keep the online format simple - the complexity inherent within aspects of the multiple, integrated Design School units may have overwhelmed students and led to their perception that they were spending more time studying online than they in fact were.

Conclusion – 'The Ripple Effect'

Universities are now beginning to realise the importance of adopting online supported learning (*McIntyre 2008*). However the willingness of teaching staff to adopt such practice is only one half of the equation. Blended learning has an impact upon how a unit is administered, how time is managed and allocated to tasks, and also raises new issues surrounding infrastructure funding and online learning environment management that academics have not previously had to deal with (*Garrison and Kanuka, 2004*). As a result of this study, we have devised the following recommendations for those wishing to integrate blended learning into their current curricula:

- Introduce blended learning in a gradual and coordinated manner across units. Start slowly, evaluate, refine and only then increase complexity if required.
- Online components should support face-to-face teaching, not replace or replicate it. Careful attention needs to be given to the planning and integration of both components so that the student and staff workload is shared between the two components, and not doubled.
- Clear guidelines are required for both staff and students outlining expectations for the online component of the course, and how this integrates with the face-to-face component.
- All staff involved in the teaching of a blended learning course should be involved in the planning phases so that all parties are aware how online tasks fit into the overall scheme of the course, and how best to integrate them to achieve the course learning outcomes.
- Realise substantial effort and time are required to develop online components initially, and this must be considered when allocating staff to these tasks.
- Institutions must acknowledge and plan for the time and effort required preparing and teaching blended learning as part of their administrative and contractual arrangements. Consideration should be given to including online roles and time requirements in casual staff contracts.

This study has highlighted just how important effective communication is in a larger blended learning initiative involving multiple teaching staff. However, the implications go beyond communication between academics, and highlight how important well-defined job expectations, recognition of extra time and resources and recognition of the legitimacy of alternative teaching approaches are within the administrative and managerial levels of the Faculty. It is hoped these findings provide a solid foundation for further research into management, training and teaching issues surrounding large scale blended learning applications in tertiary institutions.

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Simon has drawn together educators, researchers, and creative professionals to focus on researching the development and design of sustainable and effective online art and design learning programs through the development the *COFA Online Course Author Fellowship Programs*. His continuing research into online education has culminated in the co-development and supervision of the world's first fully online international postgraduate art and design degree for COFA - the Master of Cross-Disciplinary Art & Design.

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Søren is working as an e-learning and IT coordinator at IT Learning Centre, University of Copenhagen (KU). Because of its international reputation in online learning, Søren travelled to Australia in 2008 to work with COFA Online in the management and evaluation of its Blended Learning Fellowship Program. Søren is undertaking a Masters in IT from the IT University of Copenhagen and holds a BA in plant science from The Faculty of Life Sciences, KU.