Blended Synchronicity Project

Final Evaluation Report

Blended synchronicity: Uniting on-campus and distributed learners through media-rich real-time collaboration tools (ALTC Ref: ID11-1931)

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Purpose of the Report

This is the final evaluation report for the Blended Synchronicity (BlendSync) Project as required by the project reporting requirements of the Office for Learning and Teaching.

The evaluation addresses the broad evaluation question: "To what extent was the BlendSync project successful at meeting its stated outcomes and producing its deliverables?"

Project Background

The project was a collaboration between three universities - Macquarie University, Charles Sturt University and the University of Melbourne. The project was led by Matt Bower, with project management by Jacqueline Kenney (both from Macquarie University). Other team members were Barney Dalgarno and Mark Lee (Charles Sturt) and Gregor Kennedy (Melbourne).

The project ran from October 2011 to February 2014. It was structured around four phases:
- Phase 1: Documentation of current practice and formation of practitioner network
- Phase 2: Analysis of technology capabilities and learning designs
- Phase 3: Implementation and evaluation of case studies
- Phase 4: Dissemination of outcomes and final project evaluation

A highly-qualified Reference Group provided advice about project plans and processes.

Aims, Outcomes and Deliverables

The original proposal set out the aim of this project: *"This project will explicitly consider how three of these technologies – video-conferencing, web-conferencing and 3D virtual worlds – can be best used to support effective collaborative activities that engage higher education students and teachers in real-time learning irrespective of their location."*

Project Objectives

The Evaluation Brief specified that the objectives of the project are to:
1. Establish an Australian **practitioner network** – The BlendSync Collaborator Network – among higher education staff members who share an interest in the use of media-rich real-time collaboration tools in learning and teaching;

2. Investigate six **case studies** that apply a set of –cross-case evaluation criteria for learning, teaching and assessment practices. Reporting of the case studies will include the findings related to the collaborative learning design and technology implementation and integration as well as the evaluation approach applied and lessons learned;
3. Disseminate the findings through the publication of a **handbook** that contains learning design exemplars, a technology capability framework, and guidelines for practice;
4. Deliver a series of **workshops** in Australian capital cities guided by the project team and in conjunction with case-study partners and the Collaborator Network;
5. Produce **peer-reviewed publications** in academic journals and conference proceedings and also deliver bi-annual online workshops to the Collaborator Network by webinar;
6. Develop a **project website** to communicate and record project details, project activities and to facilitate dialogue and exchange within the Collaborator Network.

Evaluation approach

The Evaluation Brief required the evaluator to address three key evaluation questions about the BlendSync project:
1. Did the project achieve its stated objectives?
2. Was the project managed and conducted in ways that contributed to project success?
3. How could the processes associated with the project be improved?

The evaluation investigated processes, outputs/outcomes and deliverables emerging from the project. Project processes included project management processes and project team communication; data collection and analysis activities; implementation of the case studies; and conduct of dissemination activities.

The evaluation also investigated the ongoing impact of the project, through the sustainability of the project outcomes and deliverables, including the potential to meet the OLT's performance indicator "to change curriculum development, learning and teaching practices and/or teaching management processes in one or more institutions outside the project team".

Evidence against the evaluation questions

Did the project achieve its stated objectives?

In short, the project achieved or exceeded its stated objectives, as detailed below. Each of the four phases was completed as planned.

Practitioner network

The project team was very effective in informing the sector about the project, both nationally and internationally. Strong interest was expressed in the project by higher education staff members with an interest in the use of media-rich real-time collaboration tools in learning and teaching. Initially, this interest was in the 'scoping' survey, with 1748 responses from around the world, the majority of which were from staff at Australian Higher Education institutions. The survey ended by asking if respondents wanted to be part of an online practitioner network, and 630 staff expressed interest in this. The Practitioner network was set up as a moderated email list

and it currently has 676 members. Of these, 415 have Australian university email addresses, and 261 are from other parts of the world.

Over the course of the project, 4 webinars were conducted. The practitioner network (and other people in the sector) were invited to these webinars. An initial webinar was held to talk about the project and seek interest in contributing to case studies. Two further webinars addressed relevant issues from the project, with contributions from case study participants and collaborator network members.

A final webinar was held to explore the sustainability of the collaborator network after the end of the OLT project. This webinar had 15 participants and there was a consensus that the network should continue and be devolved beyond the project team. Four participants volunteered to take over some activities. The project leader is exploring the option of continuing the collaborator network under the aegis of ascilite's new Special Interest Group initiative.

While a risk exists that this initiative will not reach critical mass, the project team has established an environment which might lead to ongoing sustainability beyond the life of the project – a rarity for OLT projects in this evaluator's experience.

At the outset of the project, a 25 member International Advisory Group was established, made up of eminent researchers and practitioners whose areas of specialisation encompass the various fields covered by the project. While there was little contact with this group during the project, the International Advisory Group was consulted about the final draft of the Blended Synchronous Learning Handbook. A range of valuable feedback from the advisory Group was incorporated into the Final Report. The project team intends to use the International Advisory Group to assist in disseminating the Blended Synchronous Learning Handbook once endorsed by the OLT.

Case studies

While six case studies were initially planned, logistical issues dictated that only two case studies could be completed in 2012. At the beginning of 2013, three additional case studies were planned to be conducted in semester 1, while efforts continued to source a sixth case study. Ultimately, two additional case studies were conducted during 2013. The schedule of case studies in listed in Chapter 4 of the Part I report.

Each case study is documented in the Blended Synchronous Learning Handbook, as well as a 'cross-case' analysis.

Handbook

The Blended Synchronous Learning Handbook has been produced as planned. This 195 page document details the literature review and the initial 'scoping' survey. It provides a technology capability framework and overview of the case study methodology, before detailing each case study. It concludes with a cross-case analysis and guidelines for practice.

Workshops

The Events' section of the Part II report summarises a wide-ranging, well-planned set of dissemination activities which were well attended and well received by attendees. The webinars (see Part I, Chapter 3) engaged the collaborator network during the project and the workshops engaged with the sector at the end of the project (See Part I, Chapter

6). A strength of the workshops was that they used a blended synchronous approach themselves – thereby 'walking the talk' of the project.

Publications

As noted above, bi-annual online workshops were delivered to the Collaborator Network by webinar.

Section 6 of the Part II report list a number of conference papers related to the project. Refereed papers about the project were presented at the ascilite conference in 2011, 2012 and 2013. The 2012 paper was short-listed for a best paper award. The 2013 paper received the 'best full paper' award at the conference. A revised version will be considered for publication in the Australasian Journal of Educational Technology.

At the conference itself, interest in the 2013 paper was strong. Close to 90 people were crammed into a 60 seat room and approximately 40 people were turned away. The conference organisers scheduled a repeat of the paper on the final day of the conference. This is further evidence of ongoing interest in the outcomes of this project.

It is too early for the outcomes of this project to have been published in peer-reviewed academic journals. However, Section 6 of the Part II report outlines an appropriate publication plan.

Project website

A project website was developed using the Drupal web content management engine, hosted at Macquarie University. It is available at the separately purchased URL: http://blendsync.org.

The project website is used to communicate and record project details and project deliverables. Importantly, a blog function on the Home page provides information about ongoing project activities, such as the national workshops. It also provides a link to the Collaborator Network email list.

The website was updated on a semi-regular basis, as required at project milestones. The website was also updated in response to Reference Group feedback.

A concern which is common to many OLT projects is the ongoing sustainability of the project website. While the blendsync.org domain name has been purchased for five years, there is no plan for subsequent management of the website, and a risk exists that the work of the project will be lost. The only remaining legacy of the project may be the reports maintained on the OLT website.

Unintended outcomes

An unintended outcome from the project arose from feedback from stakeholders that they found it difficult to understand what is meant by Blended Synchronous Learning. That led to the workshops being conducted in blended synchronous mode (see above), but it also led to the production of brief videos about each of the cases, and an overview video. Video recorded as part of the data collection was repurposed and edited to create the eight 7-8 minute videos. No new footage was required, and the costs of editing were met by savings in other parts of the budget.

The videos have been released on the project website, but not evaluated yet. This is planned as a post-project activity in the coming months.

Was the project managed and conducted in ways that contributed to project success?

Project management processes

Project management was very thorough, in most respects. Comprehensive timelines were produced and monitored, and there was a sense of clarity about what had and had not been done.

The project team met in numerous ways on numerous occasions. They met face to face five times. Telephone conferences were held on 21 occasions with planned agendas. In addition, a great deal of communication happened through emails and individual conversations with team members.

While the project was driven by the two team members at Macquarie University, it was clear that all team members knew what they needed to do, and were engaged in those tasks.

Because of the organic and responsive nature of the conduct of the project, formal minutes and documentation of day-to-day project decisions were not kept in many cases, other than in email trails.

However, where formal decision-making was appropriate, formal processes were undertaken, in particular in relation to communication with the Reference Group. Each of the five Reference Group meetings was accompanied by a 'meeting pack', containing an agenda, minutes of the previous meetings and any documents for discussion.

As with all projects of this type, unexpected events impacted on the project plan. In my view, the project team has responded appropriately to these events, through reallocation of project resources and adjustment of timelines. For example, the April 2013 Interim Evaluation Report noted delays in identifying the remaining case studies, and a project extension of three months was granted by the OLT.

The April 2013 Interim Evaluation Report also warned "there is a risk that the analysis and writing up of the case studies could be delayed by the general business of academic life. The project team will need strong guidance, and will need to work together to keep to the timelines." Subsequent to this warning, two team members had to take extended leave for personal reasons. Despite these unexpected events, the project met its objectives on time. This is a testament to the strong leadership and project management applied to this project.

The complexity of some data collection activities was also unanticipated, as described below.

Budget management
The project budget appears to have been managed effectively. While some activities cost more than anticipated (e.g. data collection and transcription), others came in under budget. Savings were made in travel costs for team meetings, an evaluator visit and in attending case studies. A further saving came from the institutional levy being waived for 2013.

Amendments to the budget have been discussed transparently, and considered responses made to changing project circumstances. These decisions enabled a seventh case study to be carried out, and the videos to be produced.

Project team communication

Internal

There is evidence that the team has collaborated closely under the guidance of the Project Leader and Project Manager, who established an open, sharing environment. All members of the project team contributed proactively to the conduct of the project, and made considered, consensus decisions about project progress. Robust discussions around discrepancies in views led to some valuable new thinking about the utility of theory for practice. Further, unexpected additional project requirements were 'honoured' by all members of the team.

Reference Group

The project team has been engaging usefully with the reference group. The reference group gave feedback which resulted in changes to instruments and the team committing to some areas of specific focus in the final report and deliverables.

The April 2013 Interim Evaluation Report and the Part II report both identify ways that the views of the Reference Group were sought and utilised.

A drawback of Reference Group meetings attended by the evaluator was that the one hour allocated to the meeting was too short to cover all items on the agenda. This was partly because of the level of interest of the Reference Group in the project.

Implementation of the case studies and data collection and analysis activities

A previous section reports on the outcomes of the case studies. This section comments on the processes put in place to effectively implement the case studies. This implementation process was more complex than initially envisaged. Thorough planning underpinned the preparation for, and conduct of, the case studies, as described in Part I, Chapter 4.

Chapter 4 gives a clear description of the consistent multiple methods to be used for each case, including the specific contextual issues for each case, and the particular circumstances which required changes to the planned approach. Detailed documentation was produced about the instruments used, together with modifications made in response to the trial case.

The scheduling of the case studies was also thorough. Two dates were planned for the conduct of each case study. A second, provisional date was scheduled to run the research again in case of unexpected occurrences. Both dates had to be scheduled in the 'right' time of semester, and this was logistically difficult for the Project Manager.

However, this forward planning proved beneficial, because, in one case, a fire drill in the tutorial ruined the case study implementation.

The data collection process proved unexpectedly challenging, because of the multiple technologies being used in multiple locations. The project team wanted to collect all data streams in all locations, and these were different for each case. This led to up to 20 recordings per session, made up of audio in each room and between students in

different locations; visuals on screens in the classroom and virtually; text chat between students and other content. Data needed to be recorded on multiple systems simultaneously, and then subsequently collated and analysed. In addition, some of the university systems used do not automatically record all the visual content that students see – e.g. text chat.

The Project Manager wrote up all case data summaries – voluminous transcripts of all data collected for each case.

Analysis activities were then divided amongst the team according to skills and availability. The writing of case study chapters for the Blendsync Handbook were allocated to team members, not necessarily the person who conducted the case. Case study chapters were reviewed by other team members, and the Project Leader and Project Manager reviewed all case studies.

Conduct of dissemination activities

As discussed above, dissemination was well planned, broad ranging and well attended.

Response to Evaluator Feedback

The project team responded appropriately to Evaluator feedback during the process of writing the final report, and on earlier occasions. This was facilitated by an extension to the final project reporting date provided by the OLT, and enabled the project team to 'round out' the project nicely and also to improve the quality of the final report.

These issues included providing a Part I report as well as the Blended Synchronous Learning Handbook and engaging with the International Advisory Group about the Blended Synchronous Learning Handbook.

An ongoing collaborative relationship between project team and evaluator can contribute to better project outcomes than purely summative reporting.

How could the processes associated with the project be improved?

It is clear that a reflective approach has been taken by the project leadership throughout the life of the project. The Part II Report identifies some areas where project processes might have been improved.

An additional item worth noting here, and which may be of value in other projects, is the time taken to finalise and acquit a project. Too little time was set aside in this project plan for report writing and acquittal, and the requirements were not clear until after the initial contract of the Project Manager expired. While she was able to contribute to this part of the project, she had also taken other work, and this has delayed project finalisation. An extension was sought from and approved by the OLT to complete reporting requirements at the quality required by the OLT, but this added to the workload of the Project Leader.

Impact Evaluation: How sustainable are the project outcomes and deliverables?

This section addresses the OLT's performance indicator "to change curriculum development, learning and teaching practices and/or teaching management processes in one or more institutions outside the project team".

As noted above, the project has made some progress towards achieving ongoing sustainability through initiating engagement with a 'special interest group'.

The Blended Synchronous Learning Handbook has the potential to add to understanding of blended synchronous learning across the sector. The Recommendations chapter, in particular, is likely to improve the learning and teaching practice of those who read it.

However, in my view, the Handbook could have a longer lasting impact if it distinguished between blended synchronous learning (with part of the class physically present) and distance synchronous learning (where all students are remote). Many of the findings might apply equally well to both scenarios, and identification of when this is the case might extend the applicability of the findings. This is arguable 'out of scope' for this project , as is discussion of the final dot points in the handbook – when is it appropriate, or not, to use blended synchronous learning approaches.

Conclusion

In conclusion, let us return to the overarching question of this evaluation: "To what extent was the BlendSync project successful at meeting its stated outcomes and producing its deliverables?". The answer to this question is a resounding YES, and it has been done within budget and with a slightly extended timeline. These results were achieved through the ongoing commitment and professionalism of all members of the project team, despite some significant periods of personal leave.

Signature:

Date:
17 March 2014