Insights into professional learning for intensive Block Model: Lessons from a participatory evaluation for capacity building

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Abstract

We share lessons gained through supporting an institution-wide curriculum innovation via a post-graduate professional learning program. At the inception of the innovation, an intensive Block Model (BM) was unfamiliar to both the institution and its professional learning facilitators. The Graduate Certificate of Tertiary Education was re-modelled with BM as the heart of professional learning so academics would encounter BM as students. The program modelled BM principles, reinforced by meta-conversations to provide students with a reflective, immersive experience. Through a participatory evaluation, professional learning facilitators' individual reflections were distilled to generate collaborative insights into academics' capacity building for BM. Their lessons inform strategies to cultivate institution-wide capability-building including their own professional growth. Lessons shape the study recommendations. Recommendations originate from effectively engaging time-poor, diverse cohorts. (1) In recognition of the ease with which students can fall behind, embedding strategies to manage their time and stress helps to maintain a realistic study pace. (2) Authentic assessments provide students with useful products for their teaching. (3) Peer-feedback and examples of students' work exposes them to how their colleagues present their work and illustrates good BM practices. (4) Modelling BM principles must be reinforced by meta-conversations to provide students with a reflective, immersive experience of the pedagogical principals. We observed that well planned efficiencies for students often provide consequent efficiencies for staff. These insights are captured in a model for scalable institutional-based professional learning practice. Capability growth flourishes at the intersection of action, reflection and evaluation. Professional collegial conversations are the catalyst for developing context-relevant professional learning.

Practitioner Notes

1. Plan to embed PL in academics' workplace practices prior to introducing a new curriculum or pedagogical approach (e.g. an intensive mode of study).
2. Demonstrate authenticity within the PL by building a safe, respectful environment which balances authority, knowledge, and open sharing.
3. Create spaces for ongoing professional conversations and reflective practice within the organisation to ensure that institutional priorities continue to inform evolution of PL practices.
4. Leverage the power of reflection, particularly during the uncertainty of introducing an innovation.
5. Capitalise on the value of modelling practices of innovation principles, and profiling. successful examples from early adopters.
6. Be mindful of the potential cognitive load when introducing something new. Provide concurrent support to purposefully introduce new tools and technologies.

Introduction

Capability development and professional learning (PL) for academics has increasingly focused on curricular innovation and promoting institutional strategy (Gibbs, 2013) and therefore must be intentionally designed. This requires PL facilitators "to embark on a pedagogical endeavour to also enhance the human resources of the institution" (Dorner & Mårtensson, 2021, p. 226). This complex challenge is summed up by Sutherland (2018) who highlights that the whole academic, the whole institution and the whole person must be the focus of PL. This paper illustrates one such human resource enhancement endeavour to support an institution-wide strategic pedagogical change. PL facilitators at Australia's Victoria University (VU) redesigned its *Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education* (GCTE) to support adoption of the VU Block Model® (BM), an intensive mode of study. How PL facilitators develop their practice is an under-researched area (Kennedy, 2016; Whitworth et al., 2018), particularly for unusual innovative practices. The authors of this paper, a team of PL facilitators, contribute to this field by sharing their experiences of the choices they made in developing their capabilities to support academics' effective teaching practice for an intensive mode of study.

This paper introduces the study context and examines literature focused on PL. It outlines the role of the GCTE and its alignment with the strategic initiative of BM study. The paper then elaborates on the constructivist theoretical approach applied to explore our capability development and offers a model for other PL facilitators in similar situations.

Context

PL facilitators have a critical role to realise organisation reinvigoration. They must appreciate the institutional environment, have a deep understanding of the context, and the requirements of those attending the PL programs (Herbert & van der Laan, 2021). PL must be designed as strategic support for sustainable institutional innovations (Sutherland, 2018). In this context our role as PL facilitators was to assist academics to move to a new mode of teaching that was also new to us.

The new mode of teaching was the VU Block Model® initiated in 2018. The BM is a distinctly different learning experience that replaced concurrent study of four semester-long subjects with sequential study of one subject over a 4-week period. This intensive study approach was an institution-wide curriculum innovation. It prioritised substitution of lectures with active learning and scaffolded assessments, supported through extended in-class time. Most resources and activities were available via a digital learning space (McCluskey et al., 2020). Teaching in intensive BM was a significant change to VU academics' teaching practice.

The move to BM was supported through a plethora of event-based PL on a variety of topics which are on-going, complemented by just-in-time support

opportunities. In general, one-off workshops have been found to be less successful as they are implicitly founded on a deficit model (Clarke & Hollingsworth, 2002). Konjarski et al. (2019) also noted that despite PL being available, academics' teaching and marking routinely clashed with PL schedules. VU academics directly involved in the curriculum innovation had individualised, one-to-one nine-week PL with a design team consisting of learning designers and librarians. Each academic worked with this design team to reconceptualise their subject for BM.

Although there are studies related to various intensive modes of study (Hesterman, 2015; Kuiper et al., 2015; Lutes & Davies, 2018; Male et al., 2017), none were at an institutional scale. At VU, there was no direct institutional knowledge or previous experience of redesigning curricular in BM. Our task as PL facilitators was to foster academics' skills and professional confidence in facilitating learning and teaching capability in this new mode; however, the literature on conducting PL in the area was scarce.

The Immersive Professional Learning: the Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Education (GCTE)

As is a common practice in many Australian universities (Owens et al., 2021), VU offers its academic staff an accredited postgraduate program to enhance their teaching practice. The GCTE, an optional four-subject program first offered in 2013, was reframed and redesigned in 2020 applying BM design and delivery principles (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). The intention was threefold: (1) to expose academics to teaching and assessment strategies pertinent for VU Block Model® by modelling a range of practices; (2) to cultivate the integration of principles-based BM practices by VU academic staff; and (3) to emulate VU students' experience of studying in BM. The GCTE therefore taught the principles ensuring that students experienced them and consolidated their learning through application in their assessments. This design was selected to realise theory-practice integration.

Our chosen PL approach was to inspire our learners through an immersive learning experience (Hennessy et al., 2014) that occurred in an authentic environment mirroring that of their own students. An entire accredited program deliberately designed to be an immersive experience to foster skills and confidence in the uptake of an institution-wide pedagogical initiative is uncommon. However, immersive models of PL in higher education are not new (Hennessy et al., 2014; Crichton & Carter, 2015). Crichton and Carter (2015) defined immersive programs as engaging "participants in activities that require continuous involvement in the tasks; thereby, modelling the theoretical approach through actual practice" (p. 438). Such programs have the potential to demonstrate capabilities of the innovation and prioritise personal knowledge building through experiencing the new practice.

As an immersive PL experience, studying in the GCTE provided an authentic student experience of the innovation. GCTE students, who are academics in varying disciplines across VU, draw upon their personal practice to respond to assessments that are deliberately designed to be open and flexible. This strategy fosters individual learning and agency, and ensures that the PL is embedded in context and meets individual priorities.

The PL we provided via the GCTE is situated in practice. Immersive experiences are known to help educators to embed new ways of working by introducing them to the challenge, then

scaffolding to foster confidence and adoption of the innovation (Crichton & Carter, 2015). We fostered a practical and contextualised understanding of teaching in BM by engaging participants in meta-conversations that were structured discussions, while scaffolding them to engage with potentially daunting and unfamiliar practices. This immersive approach gave them a student's perspective and prompted them to consider the lived experience of their own students.

The GCTE creates critical pauses (Crichton & Carter, 2015) for academics to focus on contested and troublesome areas of BM learning and teaching. The assessments in each subject are founded on a challenge arising from participants' own teaching practice. Assessments require participants to propose solutions suited to their disciplinary needs aligned with the BM principles. The design is intentionally disruptive. It challenges participants to consider their teaching and learning in relation to an unfamiliar, intensive mode of study. Through this immersive process, participants come to understand both designing learning for BM, and the lived student experience.

Introducing the methodology to evaluate our practice

The five research participants are PL facilitators who convene and teach the GCTE program. Reflective evaluations by teaching teams to refine practices are a professional expectation. Our evaluation used a participatory approach.

Participant Researchers

As PL facilitators, we have overlapping roles within the institution including providing curriculum and learning design for BM academics, teaching in the GCTE, and serving on institutional teaching and learning bodies. We work alongside and interact with GCTE students differently in varying contexts. Our shared cultural background is VU and the Block. We conceptualise our analysis through reflections, bringing our praxis to the study. The knowledge we generate is socially and culturally constructed.

Deriving an Evaluation Plan

In developing our evaluation plans of the GCTE, we were mindful of multiple ways of knowing. Students (VU academics) and the PL facilitators were identified as the two main stakeholders, each contributing vital facets of information. The PL facilitators are the focus of this paper. The students' insights and their experience will be reported elsewhere.

After one year of implementation of the GCTE, each subject had been offered twice in BM. It was appropriate to take stock, to critically look back on the year's teaching to consider successes, identify areas for improvement, and critique our efficiencies. We knew that lessons learned must be interrogated, shared, and used to improve the program as well as our individual practice.

Approach

Our approach recognised that all the PL facilitators shared a stake in the findings and therefore are utilisation focused. As Patton described, our utilisation-focused participation was designed for "intended use by intended users" (Patton, 2003. p. 223). It was also practice-focused and concerned with being useful and making an impact on our practice. Therefore, it was highly context-specific (Parsons, 2021). Our evaluation was also reflective, collaborative, and facilitator-led.

We acknowledge that focusing on practice-based knowledge will prioritise our values and contextual needs. Since teacher agency in knowledge forming was important to us, we were keen to have an equal involvement and an equal stake in the outcomes, lessons learned and knowledge generated. Therefore, a clearly defined, systematic well-thought-out research approach that was group-initiated and improvement-orientated was critical. This approach is located in grounded theory, to purposefully draw on the lived experience of the research participants. Our approach was constructivist, chosen with the belief that purposefully sharing our teaching experiences would create valuable, co-constructed knowledge. It was expected that such knowledge would be practical, tacit and articulated differently by each of us (Parsons, 2021). Therefore, our research design was participatory, inclusive (Cousins & Whitmore, 2004) and democratic. We acknowledge that we are 'the knowers' who designed and implemented the GCTE in BM and engaged in reflection.

Method

Our participant-centred approach generated PL facilitators' personal experiences as our 'data'. Data was gathered in response to the following three questions in two phases.

1. What Block model practices did you deliberately model in your teaching? (Consider both the design of materials and space as well as teaching practice)
2. Can you provide examples of when you were successful in realising these intentions? How? Why?
3. Can you provide examples of when you were not achieving these intentions? How? Why?

Process

In the first phase, we engaged individually in structured critical reflections by responding in writing to the questions above. This ensured that we individually articulated our personal insights. Although individual reflections are valuable, they can be personally grounded, fragmented data.

Therefore, as a second phase, we met to interrogate and further explore our reflections in a focus group, moderated by a critical friend to synthesise and elicit examples from our written responses. Our reflexive, robust conversation ensured that all our voices were heard as we collectively constructed meaning.

Specifically, the process we used was as follows:

1. We identified areas for evaluation and prepared an open-ended questionnaire.

2. We Individually wrote a 200-word response/reflection to each question, then offered a summary of each response in one or two sentences.

3. We compiled and circulated the responses among the five participants.

4. The five participants met in a single focus group facilitated by a critical friend to further explore areas for evaluation.

5. The written reflections were deeply scrutinised, then analysed by two participants for common themes. Responses were reviewed against Table 1 *Block Design and Implementation Principles*. A third participant cross-checked and confirmed this review.

6. For consistency, the focus group transcript was analysed by the same two participants who analysed the written reflections. They also identified sub-themes based on theme recurrence. All participants reviewed and confirmed the themes and sub-themes.

This collaborative process facilitated a common, nuanced understanding.

Table 1

Block Design and Implementation Principles

Design principles (DP)	Implementation principles (IP)
1. Immersive sessions with clear beginnings and conclusions linked to pre and post-class activities and explicit de-briefings to conclude learning.	1. Be student-centred, active, and engaging. You are the University - be 'fabulous'.
2. Variety of learning opportunities and a variety of assessment tasks to accommodate student diversity and build depth and explore breadth.	2. Outline the relevance or connections of units to course and career. Show connection with long-term goals and counter the fragmentation of learning.
3. Developmental assessments, building in collaboration and feedback.	3. Provide early, ongoing feedback. This helps students to calibrate their performance.
a. Assessments to be completed and marked within two working days.	4. Listen to students - their interests, needs, and expectations and modify delivery as relevant.
b. Clear assessment tasks and rubrics including requirements.	5. Include opportunities for self-assessment that lead to personalised and adaptive learning. Scaffold learning and assist students to independently recognise personal strengths, weaknesses, and appropriateness of responses to tasks.
4. Knowledge exploration and application, not content transmission; active learning, not lectures.	6. Integrate authentic learning practices. Be engaging and relevant.
5. Opportunities for peer feedback and collaboration (using experiential opportunities and peer learning).	7. Leverage digital technology as part of the blended learning mix.
6. Predictable timetable: typically, three days per week enabling students to undertake other responsibilities.	
7. Assessments meet the required Australian Qualification Framework (AQF) standards and any professional body's conditions/prerequisites.	

Source: Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021, p. 16

Analytical Approach

We believe that reflexivity is key to good analysis as researchers must understand and own their individual perspectives. We systematically applied Braun and Clarke (2022)'s reflexive thematic analysis in our process, as shown in steps 5 and 6 above). This was an organic, inductive process starting from familiarising ourselves with the data, a bottom-up approach. The initial analysis moved from summary paraphrasing to coding and re-coding informing theme development and sparking revision and refinement in relation to the themes. The reflexivity was collaborative and revealed complex, rich nuances in the data.

Strengths and Limitations

There is much to learn from a participatory approach that includes perspectives of all stakeholders, including those who experienced the intervention – the students, but this is the subject of another paper. The key study limitations are that our insights are drawn from a single institution based on a single PL program that focuses on one stakeholder group – the PL facilitators who designed and taught the course.

Researcher subjectivity is inherent in our selected approach. Our analysis was consistent with a participatory design and supported our intentions. We deliberately focused on deriving actionable outcomes from VU and reflecting on those with the intention of identifying outcomes that will be useful for other organisations. Therefore, an interpretative analysis must be tailored with awareness so that host organisations can draw relevant recommendations, consistent with implicit theoretical positions of researchers.

Ethical Considerations

We were keen to evaluate our GCTE subjects to improve our practice, so there was strong personal investment. There were no "moments of conflict and challenged epistemic authority" (Caretta & Perez, 2019, p. 2) as is possible in research of this nature. All participants intended to participate in data collection, analysis, interpretation and authorship.

Our study did not call for formal ethical approval as earlier, the VU Ethics Committee had determined that participatory reflective evaluations did not require formal ethical approval when undertaken by the entire team. Furthermore, the study would not result in reputational harm for individuals or the institution.

We all understood participation conditions and the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Two participants withdrew from authorship while authorising continued use of their data. These participants are acknowledged.

Results

We share insights into our practices, concerns, successes and learnings we derived from our PL facilitation as study participants. We examine our experience in relation to the institution's *Block Design and Implementation Principles* (Table 1) and show how we applied BM practices. Since learning in BM was a new experience for our GCTE students, VU academics, it was important that we gave them an authentic BM student experience. In the GCTE we aimed to model BM

practices in-situ for our students, as well as remind them of the principles they implemented when designing their own subjects.

Table 2 illustrates the four key themes with sub-themes which identify lessons learned through our analysis process. While these themes can be partially matched to the institution's *Block Design and Implementation Principles* (Table 1), our reflections extended beyond these principles.

Table 2

Lessons Learned

Themes	Sub-themes: lessons learned
Theme 1: Designing and planning for engagement.	1.1 Engaging all students with all the tasks. 1.2 Responding to differences between cohorts. 1.3 Timing the introduction of technology tools. 1.4 Planning for success. 1.5 Scaffolding effectively through developmental assessments. 1.6 Designing suitable facilitator workload and students' study load.
Theme 2: Managing for timely progression.	2.1 Designing for effective time management. 2.2 Responding to student queries in a timely manner. 2.3 Scheduling for progression.
Theme 3: Modelling practices and expectations.	3.1 Modelling practices as appropriate for postgraduate level. 3.2 Learning from practices our students model to us. 3.3 Using examples of student work more proactively to further learning, 3.4 Modelling the technology-pedagogy balance.
Theme 4: Assessment practicalities.	4.1 Embedding authentic assessments. 4.2 Scheduling assessments. 4.3 Considering AQF levels, complexity and rigour.

The five participants are anonymised through pseudonyms which do not represent gender or ethnicity.

Theme 1: Designing and Planning for Engagement

This theme captures our preparation for teaching prior to implementing the GCTE in BM. We were mindful of the pressures students would be under so we designed to engage time-poor, diverse cohorts. We planned scaffolded learning activities and assessments to enhance engagement. While aware of the BM principle 'Leverage digital technology as part of the blended learning mix' (Implementation Principle 7, Table 1), we remained cautious about introducing too many new

tools into a subject. We believed that the ultimate key to success was to heighten the relevance of study for our students through authentic activities and assessments.

1.1 Engaging all students with all the tasks

Conversations revealed that students do not engage with all the tasks and resources available. They are *"immersed in just getting the job done"* (Taylor) and *"will not use all the resources provided, however good they might be"* (Bart). While the lack of engagement with tailor-made interactive resources was disappointing, it emphasised that learning resources in BM must be integrated seamlessly. 'Optional' resources were likely to be disregarded.

1.2 Responding to differences between cohorts

Participants' comments were a reminder that *"every student cohort is not the same. Expectations are different, and to anticipate different requirements and requests"* (Taylor). As the queries raised and issues prioritised varied between the cohorts, the focus and support provided had to vary accordingly.

> *So we have a very high number of TAFE teachers as well as HE academics who are doing the course now. There's high interaction between those two cohorts and it's fantastic to see that they're learning from each other, because sometimes they're teaching the similar discipline, but at that different AQF level.* (Bart)

Students used their discipline similarities to draw insights that are valuable across different program levels and the facilitators recognised the peer-to-peer learning as it emerged within cohorts.

1.3 Timing the introduction of technology tools

Participants highlighted that technology-based tools should be purposefully introduced with embedded support strategies. The conversation also pointed the need to carefully consider the application of technology-based tools to reduce further demands on the learners' cognitive load.

> *[S]o maybe they were a bit overwhelmed or had that trepidation about using some of the tools, for example. But once they saw someone else using it and were able to use it, then they felt more comfortable in having a go at doing it themselves. So I think that that sense of collaboration and peer learning is something that we were trying to encourage, both within the workshops and drop-ins, but also in the online environment.* (Mel)

1.4 Planning for success

Thorough planning for intensive modes of teaching such as BM was underscored as critical for student success. This is both meticulous advance planning as well as being aware of student progress and the impact it has on their successful completion.

> *[L]ooking to see if somebody hasn't submitted and hasn't asked you for an extension. It's getting on the front foot and contacting them straight away to find out what's happening can actually save you time down the track with dealing with somebody who needs perhaps special consideration, etc. So being proactive saves you time and helps the student and you.* (Mel)

This was even more critical when teaching consecutive blocks.

[B]ut you can often be in a position where you're finishing off one unit, setting up the other one. And I think that on a rolling basis that that really does compromise the amount of time that you have to get things set up. (Ertha)

The Block moves fast so the entire subject must be planned, designed and developed before students enrol.

1.5 Scaffolding effectively through developmental assessments

Large assessments were broken into smaller tasks, scaffolded as developmental steps. Participants found this scaffolding towards a large assessment was effective and efficient.

[T]he way we've designed our task is that they build on each other. And so I think that in itself supports the students to get through each assessment task with the feed forward that we provide each step along the way. And I think that that also helps with efficiency as well as, you know, developing the student to achieve success. (Mel)

1.6 Designing suitable facilitator workload and students' study load

Participants were emphatic about the need to be pragmatic and clearly communicate how they will manage their workload, while attending to emergent student queries.

So just trying to manage some of that administrative load. Saying up front, 'this is what's going to happen. Post your questions to a discussion forum. I will respond to questions there.' So you're not doing lots of emails. (Ertha)

In addition, study participants noted that student complaints about BM workload is not necessarily about study load. Students undertaking this course are academics in the institution with a workload that includes teaching. Working full-time and undertaking a full-time study load is onerous.

The block assumes that you've got more time for study. It's not overly well set up for part time study, and I think that that's where we get difficulties. Let's be blunt, how many hours does an academic do? And the literature for decades recognises 50-60 hours per week. And that's what their working week is. It's not thirty five hours. So we need to keep that in our mind. (Ertha)

There can be an apparent contradiction between institution enthusiasm for a new innovative practice and on-the-ground realities. Clarifying students' study load expectations is critical at the start of an intensive mode.

You want to say the Block is easy, you will move through this pretty quickly and it's fine. You know that marketing sometimes doesn't help manage realistic expectations. To counter this we provide a head-start and upfront suggestions of to how to keep pace in the Block. We have to be careful not to promise that studying in the Block is easily done although it is over within a month. (Taylor)

Theme 2: Managing for Timely Progression

Acknowledging that there is much to be achieved over the 4-week Block, and the ease with which students can fall behind, it was essential to embed strategies to manage students' time and design for a realistic pace of study. In order to achieve timely completion we needed to "Listen to students

- their interests, needs, and expectations" (Implementation Principle 4, Table 1). An efficient technique to maintain an appropriate pace was to respond to questions promptly.

2.1 Designing for effective time management

Time management is critical in the fast-pace of BM. Participants noted the importance of being organised, managing their time as well as *"supporting the students in realising that as well"* (Alice). Equally necessary were predictable, clear learning spaces so no cognitive demand was made on the student.

> *I think rather than having to go through and understand the navigation of the spaces, students could concentrate on the content. The spaces were designed consistently, which was really good, and I did hear a few students comment on how convenient it was.* (Ertha)

> *The rubrics, absolutely from a marking perspective that was really good. And also that's another example where you can demonstrate to students how they can utilise these tools to support their marking, to actually manage their own workload.* (Alice)

2.2 Responding to student queries in a timely manner

Participants observed that it was critical to respond to student queries in a timely fashion:

> *I think that communication with students through the VU collaborate space saves you time. So whilst you put a bit of time into it, it saves you time later down the track when more questions come from students.* (Bart)

Comprehensive responses to student queries were equally important as timely responses.

> *[W]hen they do ask questions, it's really important to answer those properly, whether it is on the discussion forum or if they ask via email or however they choose to ask questions so that they can continue on with the assessment in a timely manner. And those obstacles are overcome immediately.* (Mel)

Participants noted that student queries are not confined to the teaching period. Responding to these in a timely manner were equally critical.

> *Units don't necessarily start on day one, either. There's usually a percentage of students who are asking queries, sometimes weeks in advance. So you need to be able to respond to that.* (Alice)

2.3 Scheduling for progression

Successful PL is dependent on scheduling around academics' heavy workloads. This includes an awareness of academics' timetables, and variations that occur between different sectors in the institution.

> *I think we had a diverse cohort that were quite vocal in informing us that the timing of our sessions perhaps wasn't what they wanted and may have interfered with their work commitments or other commitments that they had. And so one of the things that we're doing moving forward is just having a rethink of the timing of the sessions.* (Mel)

Widely divergent academics' schedules constrained communities-of-practice formation and cohort-learning. Poor scheduling compromises program progression and completion.

Theme 3: Modelling Practices and Expectations

We were mindful that our students had not experienced BM as learners. Modelling practices and expectations, including the technology-pedagogy balance was important. Models of our own practice and examples of students' work contextualised by meta-conversations served to clarify expectations. We planned a variety of authentic assessments and practices (Implementation Principle 6 and Design Principle 2, Table 1) appropriate for the GCTE. Furthermore, participants observed how their students enriched the classes by demonstrating the range of their proficiencies as experienced VU academics.

3.1 Modelling practices as appropriate for postgraduate level
Rather than simply introduce BM principles in theory, participants deliberately modelled these across the course and within subjects, in the curriculum, in every assessment and in the structure of the learning management system:

> *[U]sing the unit space as an example of kind of what the expectations are and saying, 'this is what we've used. These are the sorts of activities that we have, and this is kind of how you can build that learning'.* (Alice)

Assessment was often cited as an example of modelling.

> *[W]e deliberately modelled curriculum and assessment ... I think the unit itself models Block model practices ... I think the whole GCTE is designed to model the Block experience.* (Taylor)

> *So big focus on assessments being at the appropriate AQF level, but of course, achievable in the four-week time frame, and again, modelling those for our academics who are also in the situation* (Bart)

Participants modelled curriculum design, learning design, assessments and the subjects' learning management system to illustrate Block principles.

3.2 Learning from practices our students model to us
Participants were aware that there was much to be learned from their own students who were proficient and experienced academics in the institution.

> *They have different pedagogical practices and the way they introduce things and teach things, let alone the content. So you're just learning all the time and it's fabulous that it improves my practice and the students are learning from each other.* (Bart)

While participants modelled the Block principles, the students' practices provided additional exposure for the PL facilitators.

3.3 Using examples of student work more proactively to further learning
Similarly, participants showcased examples of previous student work to further learning. It allowed students to see how peers approached the same task in a variety of disciplines.

> *[I]n the workshops to have the opportunity for students to actually use the exemplars and look at them and assess them against the rubric in class and then have opportunity to engage with the teacher about that. So that works on a number of levels because it also allows students the opportunity to clarify the assessment task.* (Mel)

However, one of the challenges of the first implementation of a modified subject is the absence of examples of previous student work.

[T]he first year of implementing the Block really highlighted the value of exemplars because so often we were being asked, can you provide an exemplar? We need to see an exemplar. And because the assessment tasks were new, we were unable to do that. So it actually really, I think, gave us insight and the value of those exemplars. (Ertha)

3.4 Modelling the technology-pedagogy balance

Participants also noted the importance of modelling the application of technology purposefully, and explaining reasons for selection of that tool so the purpose is clear to students.

Sometimes students who see all these tools and get incredibly excited and not really appreciate just how much work is involved in being able to implement some of them . . . then it was really just reminding them that they need to start with what their learning outcomes are, what their intentions are, making sure that they get that solid first, then building on with these tools to support that. (Alice)

Theme 4: Assessment Practicalities

Assessment practicalities included scheduling submissions with a focus on rigour, progress and learning. Furthermore, authentic assessments favoured students with useful products, and through peer-feedback exposed them to how their colleagues practiced or presented their work. This resulted in professional communication between peers leading to improved personal practice. These efficiencies were also helpful for staff.

4.1 Embedding authentic assessments

There was consensus among the participants about the advantage of embedding authentic assessments. In a BM setting, they were powerful strategies to make assessments relevant for the students and efficient for the teaching team. Authentic assessments enabled students to demonstrate professional practice:

[T]he fact that the assessments are authentic is helpful because it's something that'll be used. I would ask students to review each other's work and give feedback and thereby also expose them to breadth of ways of doing things and other people's ways of doing things. And that also makes it easier for us that we don't have to create a new assessment in each Block. And it is a Block principle that assessments are authentic. (Taylor)

4.2 Scheduling assessments

Participants noted the tension between student and facilitator priorities.

So I think there was just that delicate balance of trying to work out what was ideal for the student, but also what was ideal for the teaching team. (Mel)

Within an assessment schedule, facilitators also need to consider the time taken for marking, as well as provide sufficient time for students to consider and apply the feedback to their next scaffolded task.

I think that the scaffold assessments were done really well, along with the default feedback, that [Alice] had said. I think that staff also coming to grips with rubrics that had

> *feedback embedded in them would help them focus on what the feedback was actually about, not commenting on the content so much, and was able to assist in meeting those very tight marking timelines.* (Ertha)

4.3 Considering AQF levels, complexity and rigour

Ensuring that the cognitive complexity of the tasks are appropriate for postgraduate study was discussed by participants.

> *[O]ne of the big challenges that we had was around word count and AQF level. ... Focus on what's required at the AQF level and get it really tight and highlight that AQF level. So if you want students to 'critically reflect' upon something, don't ask them to 'describe the context'. So, actually pitch where you want the students to be at. That is one vehicle to try and reduce the number of words. So I think the rigour, the standards etc, go hand in hand with addressing that challenge.* (Ertha)

We were working conceptually at a BM principles level, while modelling practices at a classroom level. Working along this continuum helped us identify areas of success and those needing ongoing vigilance to achieve PL objectives.

Discussion: Professional Learnings

Our conversation and written reflections provided insights into the realities, challenges and potentials of designing for and teaching in BM. As convenors of separate subjects, a rich and nuanced discussion unfolded. The results confirmed that we practiced a variety of BM design and implementation principles by citing illustrations of how we realised these. We bought unique perspectives from each teaching context informed by the subject matter and dynamics of different cohort compositions. Our individual contributions prioritised what was relevant to each of our teaching contexts. Since each subject was offered twice, it provided us with profound learnings that strengthened our own practice, and highlighted areas that needed fine-tuning: a springboard from which to improve our individual and collective practices.

Lessons Learned as Subject Convenors

Given the time-shortened BM, we learned the absolute criticality of meticulous planning. It was important that we effectively managed our time as we conducted our teaching through the four weeks. We learned that the pedagogical strategies we applied must set the learning pace and facilitate students to successfully manage their time and move through the subject. Our scaffolded, developmental assessments were a valuable method of quickly feeding-forward learning and maintaining the fast pace for subsequent activities. Since students moving through the subject in a timely manner is beneficial to both students and academics, we learned the importance of capitalising on every opportunity to assist students to manage their time. Directing student queries to an actively moderated assessment discussion forum, illustrates this strategy.

Some of our learning was confirmatory, such as the potential of authentic assessment tasks to enhance student engagement through relevance to their individual practice. We realised that not all students engage with all the tasks and resources provided. Furthermore, the difference in student cohorts amplifies this variation. Consequently, these factors shape the PL that students' experience.

As students prioritised their investment of time over the four-week study, we observed an increased engagement with the tasks and resources when clear instructions are provided on why, when and how to engage with these. Using previous students' work as examples of expectations, was similarly effective in a time-poor context. Furthermore, being mindful of the potential cognitive load of new technologies as well as its demand on student time to learn something new, we introduced tools purposefully with concurrent support. We intentionally introduced only one new tool per subject that students had not previously encountered in other GCTE subjects.

Institutions need to consider their unique teaching patterns when implementing PL. We learned that the logistics of offering the subjects must be considered carefully. We offered each subject twice per year. Furthermore, over a two-year cycle, each subject was offered within the traditionally low teaching Blocks of Summer and Winter. While the program was available for part-time study for up to two years, these multiple offerings helped GCTE students to manage full-time teaching with a four-week full-time study.

We learned the power of modelling BM principles when facilitating. Modelling of learning activities and assessments was a powerful and persuasive strategy to illustrate design and implementation principles. We deliberately drew students' attention to this modelling through meta-conversations and discussion forums. This strategy enlivened the BM design and implementation principles and enriched the learning, making it a truly immersive experience. Our task-specific technology use, also served as a model for academics to use technology purposefully in their classes.

While these observations are not unique to teaching an intensive mode of study like the VU Block Model®, the lessons learned are amplified as students are more fully engaged with the tasks in their immersive study environment, or more pragmatic in their response to their perception of tight time constraints.

Lessons Learned as PL Facilitators

The critical questions arising from this study for us as PL facilitators are: who taught us and what is the PL for PL facilitators? How do we renew and invigorate our practice? It is essential to find ways to nourish and stimulate our professional practice. We created an effective vehicle for our own PL through structured and focused, collaborative professional conversations and a participatory approach to evaluation. Contemporary PL is in our collegial networks, within us, and in our practice, as this study highlighted. We need to be developing our practice continually and draw on the wisdom of our energetic network by continuously reflecting, reasoning, debating and sharing new ideas and learning from each other to keep pace in a fast-changing world.

Our conversations have proved that to evaluate practice as well as to improve practice, regular team-based collegial and structured conversations are necessary. For us, this process generated significant non-intentional learning and contributed to our own professional and collective growth.

Deriving a Conceptual Model

Our professional growth took place at the intersection of action (our facilitation of the GCTE), reflection (insights drawn from the pedagogy and environment), and evaluation (our professional collegial conversations), as captured in Figure 1. We locate this within Herbert and Van der Laan (2021)'s overlap between learning and teaching-informed, and policy-driven PL. Like others who

provide PL (Pleschová et al., 2021), we derived immeasurable learnings from our collegial conversations. This learning was particularly valuable as we were facilitating PL across the institution to support institutional pedagogical change. Our collegial conversations built trust (Datey, 2022) and the resulting learning was an unanticipated positive opportunity for us.

Figure 1

Professional Learning Growth at the Intersection of Action, Reflection and Evaluation.
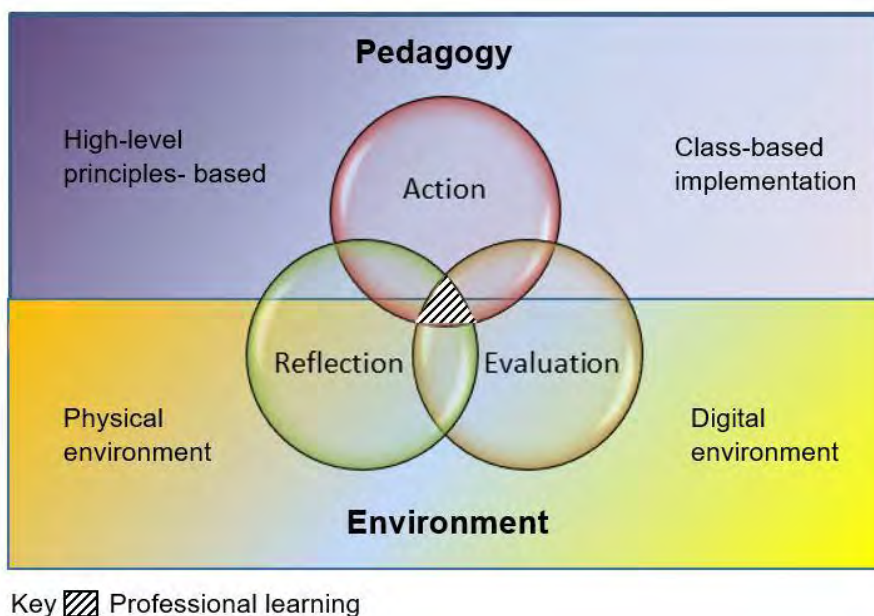
This contextualised intersecting PL model originates from action (our teaching and facilitation) and can readily be applied in other PL situations. The institutional context, its high-level pedagogical principles implemented in class-based contexts, and the physical and digital environments inform the design of relevant professional learnings. For PL of the PL facilitators, we added reflection-in-action and reflection-on-evaluation. Given the beneficial learning from our professional conversations about the GCTE, we recommend similar structured, practical conversations centred on other PL initiatives. Such conversations will derive contextualised learnings for the institution. It is important to facilitate these conversations in order to convert experience into learning. Group reflections that consider what worked and what further work is necessary is a functional strategy to foster PL. To optimise benefit, conversations must be continuous and interactive. They provide evidence for improvement through systematic engagement with critical evaluation of practice and outcomes.

Our learning was informal and self-directed and although seemingly at a micro-level, this was not the case. Given our central role in the institution, our learnings have a wider impact as we influence colleagues' teaching effectiveness and student learning. The critical learning we derived from this study is, therefore, far reaching.

Future Considerations for PL Facilitators

The challenges for PL facilitators will be particularly evident in the early stages of support for an institution-wide pedagogical change - a dynamic, flexible workspace. This paper has its roots in such a workspace. Our experience sensitised us to strategies that were successful and well received by the academic staff, versus those that added complexity and frustration.

With the introduction of BM, the PL facilitators must be conversant with the elements of the new approach to gain confidence of the academics. "[I]n the presence of uncertainty, one is obligated to learn from experience" (Shulman 2005, p.19). PL facilitators must be able to draw upon conceptual insights to develop practical expertise. They must also have a willingness to critique and be prepared to acknowledge challenges, and an open disposition to learn from early adopters because *their* lessons are tailored to *your* institutional setting. This foundation helps establish the necessary credibility of PL facilitators when a new pedagogical initiative is first introduced.

Our model shown in Figure 1 is scalable and can be used to inform PL facilitators' capacity building as well as that of academic staff at a program, faculty and institutional level. The model is also sustainable as it extends already deeply embedded higher education practices, that of quality assurance and reflection. It provides a systematic way of extracting and documenting learnings that would be otherwise lost between the gaps of organisational quality assurance and individual practice-based evaluations.

There should be consideration of how PL facilitators build innovative capacities. They have a critical contribution to make in realising an effective and smooth response to change. We contribute to the discourse by proposing a model to ensure relevant capacity-building.

Acknowledgement

Conflict of Interest

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