

Editorial

Blended Learning Strategy: Application for Orthoptic Teaching

The internet has changed the way we conduct our lives. Human communication, accessing news and media, personal finances and shopping are just some of the things we do differently in the digital age. As a result of this electronic world we find ourselves in, the way we learn and therefore teach has also had to adapt to ensure a modern approach.

In response to this, many universities across the globe are modifying the way they offer education to students and orthoptic training has not been immune to the challenges of keeping up with the digital age. Information is more easily accessible and instantaneous and therefore the way students engage with learning has been transformed. Students require increased stimulation and encouragement to be active participants in their learning experience.¹ Activities and conditions which stimulate students and therefore generate high quality learning is termed 'student engagement' and one way to achieve this is through the *Blended Learning approach*.² Blended learning is the integration of traditional classroom face-to-face learning with an online learning experience.³

La Trobe University in Melbourne has launched the 'Future Ready' and 'Distinctive Education Project' initiatives and this is influencing the way we design classes for orthoptic students, both in terms of delivery and also assessment.

The orthoptic program at La Trobe mostly utilises an Enquiry-Based Learning (EBL) approach which was adopted in 2009 and is a teaching strategy where students are presented with a problem and learning is directed by the student through a process of research-oriented enquiry to resolve the problem. Whilst most of the program is delivered face to face with all subject materials available online, several subjects have been designed in *Blended Learning* mode (Concomitant and Incomitant Strabismus; Low Vision Rehabilitation) or solely online (Human Vision and Function; Models of Eye Service Delivery). The orthoptic program also integrates a number of innovative approaches to facilitate student engagement including:

- i. The development of a simulator (Ocular Motility Virtual Environment (OMVE)) which is designed to simulate eye movement disorders and provide students with an opportunity to examine 'simulated patients' in a safe environment;
- ii. The development of online interactive tools such as the 'Vertometry Learning Object' that utilises multimedia (including video, audio, text and animations) to develop clinical skills in measuring the strength/prescription of glasses; and
- iii. Utilisation of simulated patients to develop communication skills.

Several of our subjects include assessments beyond traditional assignment and exams. These aim to develop student understanding of discipline-specific concepts or skills using a variety of modes, technologies and media in an integrated

manner. These have been developed in consultation with educational designers. For example, as part of the introductory *Clinical Practice* subject, students are required to produce an instructional video of a clinical skill for peer review and to develop or improve online resources on this technique. In order to facilitate the flexible learning experience, to engage students and to keep up with the digital learning age, we utilise a number of internet-based teaching technologies. These include providing an online presence for all subjects; lectures are recorded using the *Echo360* program in addition to *iTunesU*; *Pebblepad* allows students to document their observations and reflections whilst on clinical placement, *Wikiversity* facilitates content delivery and some student assessment incorporates *Wikipedia* or YouTube to present and update clinically relevant content.

As Garrison,³ p97, so eloquently states "What makes blended learning particularly effective is its ability to facilitate a community of inquiry. Community provides the stabilising, cohesive influence that balances the open communication and limitless access to information on the Internet." The orthoptic discipline at La Trobe University has made substantial progress in terms of redesigning the learning approach and the academic benefit of this is significant. As we continue to strive for excellence in teaching and further develop our approach we are mindful to evaluate the effectiveness of *Blended Learning* in the sense of student satisfaction, performance (both theoretical and clinical) and measure achievement of learning goals. We are confident that with this approach and innovative thinking, our orthoptic graduates will be 'Future Ready' and capable of competently addressing the challenges of the workforce as they transition into it.

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