

## Blended Learning Quality Evaluation

As part of the program reset working group, the Blended and Online Learning Quality Evaluation Group was detailed with the task of soliciting feedback from students and instructors about their experience of blended learning. We specifically asked about their experiences during the Fall 2021 term, the first term during which it was possible for students and instructors to return in-person to campus.

The aim of the evaluation was to gather feedback that would allow us to evaluate and improve upon the blended learning delivered during this first term. While blended learning is not a new mode of delivery for VCC, the pandemic has led to an increase in its adoption, sometimes in subject areas and with instructors who did not have previous experience of blended delivery.

Given the results of the most recent student survey, it is clear that there is a desire on the part of students to continue to enjoy the flexibility of online and blended learning at VCC. Based on the results of this evaluation, we are in a position to build on strong foundations of quality blended delivery.

The evaluation comprised two parts:

1. In-person (via Zoom) Student Focus Groups
2. Online Faculty Survey

The findings of both are summarized below, with recommendations offered at the end of the findings.

### Student Focus Groups

Two student focus groups were conducted on May 5<sup>th</sup> and June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022, with a total of 11 students taking part. Student participation was voluntary, and students from nursing, business management, dental, and graphic design programs signed up and took part in the focus groups. A small incentive (\$20 Amazon gift card) was offered to students completing the focus group. Each focus group lasted 45 minutes.

The focus groups were facilitated by Julie Gilbert, Instructional Adviser in CTLR, with representatives from Institutional Research also being present in each group. Groups were conducted over Zoom, with the session being recorded for the purposes of notetaking afterwards.

The following three open-ended questions were used in the focus groups to prompt and direct discussion:

1. What does a high-quality blended course look like to you?
2. Can you talk about your sense of engagement in a blended course?
3. What was your experience with focusing on your studies in a blended learning course?

Students also provided feedback and comments that did not specifically answer one of these prompts, but which was valuable nonetheless, and which is included here.

Each focus group started with the following disclaimer:

“Your participation in these sessions is completely voluntary and all feedback is anonymous and confidential. None of the responses will be connected to identifying information. The results

may be used by the Institutional Research department for institutional research purposes only. We are permitted to collect the information in this survey under the College and Institute Act and it is compliant with the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act of British Columbia.”

## Q1 What does a high-quality blended course look like to you?

### *Course Design and Delivery*

In a high-quality blended course...

- Appropriate use would be made of synchronous and asynchronous modes, and a good balance of the two modes would be achieved. A typical student comment was ‘if it can be done online then do it online’.
- Course design and delivery would be consistent between courses in the same program, and within a course where multiple instructors teach the content. Some students reported that content delivery, comfort with the technology etc. varied between instructors in the same class, and between classes in the same program, leading to an inconsistent learning experience.
- The course would include opportunities for the student to review the content more than once (e.g. recorded lectures). Repeatedly students reported that they really liked the ability to review pre-recorded lectures.
- All content would be accessible – e.g. recorded lectures would include closed captioning. This was reported as being especially beneficial to students with learning disabilities, and would reduce the need for accommodation in some cases.
- For remote synchronous sessions via e.g. Zoom students would be encouraged to keep their camera on, with ‘camera off’ breaks at regular intervals – this was seen to be key to student engagement and full participation
- All course material would be aligned – some students reported being assessed on content that had not been taught.
- All instructions for assignments and other coursework would be clear – this was seen as especially important for online learning; students reported a lack of clarity of expectations for some of the online assignments and group work they were required to complete.

### *Student preparedness*

In a high quality blended course...

- Students would be prepared for self-directed study and would understand the expectations from their instructor prior to starting the course. Some students reported that they weren’t sufficiently informed of these expectations at the start of the course and had to learn for themselves which subject matter they were expected to learn themselves, and which subject matter would be covered in the instructor-led sessions.
- Students would have early access to course schedules so they could plan their studies around other life commitments (work, family, etc.). Students reported that many of them need to work as well as study, have other commitments, and may live far from the campuses.

- Thoughtful scheduling within a program and individual courses would mean that all students could participate in synchronous sessions. As above, early, thoughtful scheduling would allow more students to fit their studies around other commitments.

#### *Instructor presence*

In a high quality blended course...

- Instructors would be accessible for communication at predictable times (e.g. office hours would be posted somewhere) and would give prompt feedback via multiple modes (email, Moodle messaging, Zoom). Most students reported that their instructors were available and went out of their way to provide feedback and support.
- There would be multiple ways to connect with the instructor
- Instructors would make use of available analytics to identify where a student was struggling and needed extra help. A comment from the focus group alluded to the fact that it's harder for instructors to 'see' who is struggling in an online class.

#### *Instructor preparedness*

In a high quality blended course...

- Instructors would meet a minimum level of technical proficiency and would understand the unique requirements for blended teaching. Students reported an inconsistency in the extent to which instructors were prepared to teach in a blended format – from issues with the technology (leading to long delays in some remote synchronous classes) to issues with what should be delivered online and what should be reserved for in-person learning.

### Q2 Can you talk about your sense of engagement in a blended course?

#### *Course Design and Delivery*

- Students craved interaction, in both the online and synchronous/f2f components, and saw interactivity as being key to an engaging learning experience.
- Students reported that having teambuilding or icebreaking activities early on (usually in-person) helped them to be more engaged with their classmates.
- Not being f2f encourage some students (e.g. introverts) to participate more fully. Students reported that not being in a f2f classroom environment meant that they heard opinions from a wider range of the class, as opposed to hearing from the same group of confident speakers in their in-person classes.
- Using the range of engagement tools in Zoom was seen as a positive way to increase engagement. Zoom classes that included polling, presentations from students, breakout room sessions, were all seen as more engaging than if the instructor had simply delivered the content as a lecture.
- Being able to review content in their own time and at their own pace was seen as beneficial to student engagement.
- Working in smaller groups was mentioned as an engaging way to learn.

#### *Instructor presence*

- Having the instructor be available to answer questions and provide clarity was seen as an engaging feature of the blended courses

#### *Disengaging aspects of the blended experience included:*

- The tendency among students to have their camera off in a Zoom session.
- The shift between onsite and offsite delivery, especially if there were long blocks of all onsite or all offsite learning.
- Not being able to get immediate feedback when presented with a problem or when seeking clarification – whereas in class a student could raise their hand, online and in asynchronous activities they would have to wait for an instructor or a classmate to respond.
- Overlong Zoom sessions (a student reported being expected to attend from 9am – 4pm) we seen as disengaging.
- Inability to get to know fellow students.

### Q3 What was your experience with focusing on your studies in a blended learning course?

#### *Course Design and Delivery*

- Students reported that it was important for the instructions for asynchronous activities to be very clear – needing to contact the instructor for clarification and then await a response negatively impacted their focus.
- Overlong Zoom sessions led to a loss of focus.
- Students reported that sometimes task-based skills were taught online, making it hard to focus on the learning – they highlighted the importance of teaching content appropriate to the medium of delivery.
- Having a lot of asynchronous, self-paced activities made it possible for students to plan their studies and to retain focus.
- Students found it harder to retain focus when they had a lot of concurrent courses – thoughtful scheduling was seen as key to helping them to retain focus.

#### *Student preparedness*

- Students had to work harder in the online parts of a blended course to avoid falling behind. Sometimes the volume of pre-reading ahead of an in-person or synchronous class was overwhelming,
- Students reported that working in their own time led to fewer distractions and an increase in focus.
- A desire for more counsellor time to be available so that students had somebody to approach apart from their classmates and/or instructor if they were having difficulty.

#### *Instructor presence*

- When the instructor was not available to provide help and feedback the pace of learning was reduced.

### *Instructor preparedness*

- Differences in instructor ability and readiness to teach online led to problems for students in focusing on the learning.

### *Other comments and feedback*

Feedback was generally positive – none of the students we spoke with wanted a return to fully f2f delivery, and most of them appreciated the logistical benefits of blended learning – the ability to schedule their learning around other commitments, save on transit/gas costs and commute times etc.

Students reported that the delivery mode they ended up experiencing (blended) was not what they had expected on signing up for the course – in some cases they had hoped for a fully online learning experience because they were concerned about meeting other students face to face during the pandemic.

Students also questioned why their fees were still increasing by 2% PA despite the shift in delivery mode – there was the perception that blended learning should be cheaper to deliver and access than fully f2f learning.

It was noted that the appropriate selection of delivery mode was important – some courses/subjects were better taught f2f, some online and others in a blended way.

Students liked being able to advocate for change that would help the next cohort in the same class. They also appreciated the opportunity to have a former student being invited into class to provide advice at the start of their learning journey.

For some subject areas where teamwork is a core skill (e.g. nursing) it was very difficult to replicate a sense of teamwork in the online environment.

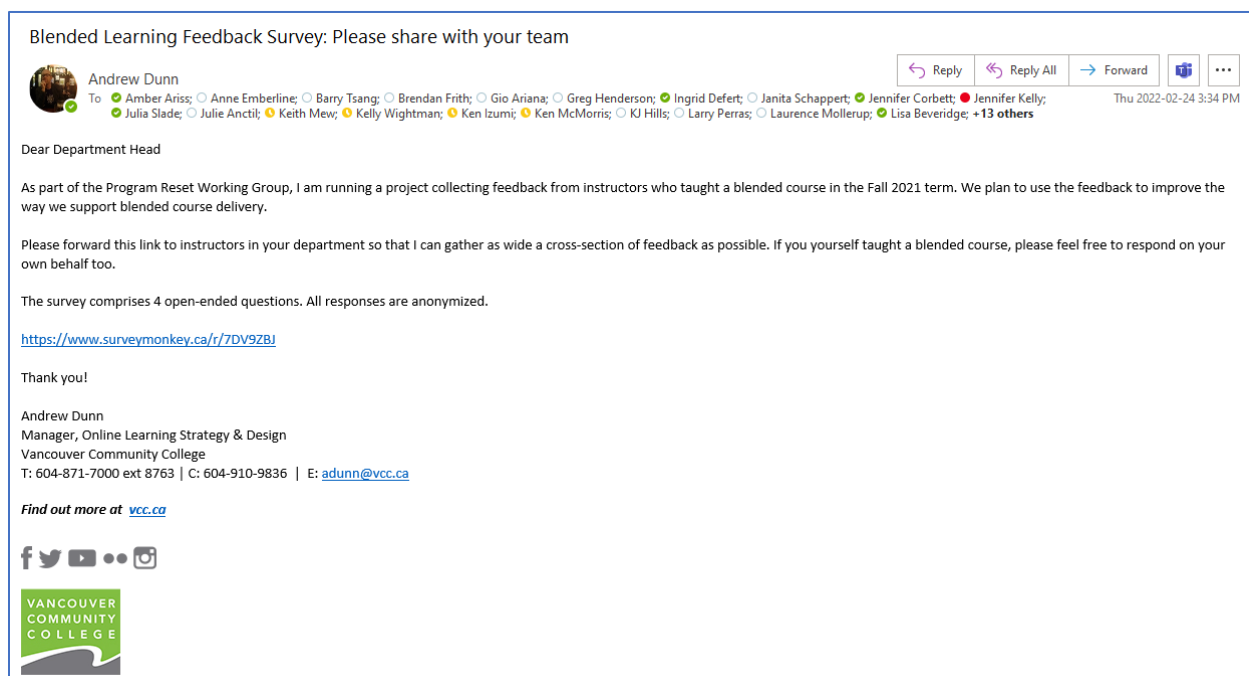
Students reported that blended learning made them more accountable for their own learning, and saw this as a positive benefit.

## Instructor Online Survey

An online survey was created with the similar prompts/questions to those used in the student focus groups.

- Q1: What does a high-quality blended course look like to you? What do you think are the pros and cons of blended delivery?
- Q2: Can you talk about your sense of your students' engagement in a blended course you've delivered?
- Q3: What was your experience with your students focusing on their studies in a blended course you've delivered?
- Q4: Can you talk about the effect of blended delivery on meeting the learning goals of your course?

A link to the survey was sent out to department heads on 24 February 2022 in an email:



A total of 27 responses were received between 25 February and 9 June, 2022. The average time spent on each response was between 6 and 7 minutes.

The responses are summarized below. The full survey results are included as Appendix 1.

Q1: What does a high-quality blended course look like to you? What do you think are the pros and cons of blended delivery?

### Emerging themes:

- Flow: the elements of the blend need to complement each other. For example, the online component could prepare the students for the in-person component. Theory is well suited to online, whereas practice is often better suited to in-person.

- Clear Expectations: Students need to understand the intent and purpose behind the learning activities. Learning outcomes need to be clearly stated and linked to activities and assessments.
- Assessment: Evaluation needs to be linked to the activities that the students completed. Avoid high-stakes assessments that require a lot of technical skill.
- Content: The content in the course should be directly relevant to the students. There should be regular opportunities for skills practice. There should be multiple ways of accessing knowledge (video, forum, quiz) and demonstrating learning.
- Community: There needs to be regular contact between the instructor and the students via Zoom, Moodle Messaging, email. The instructor needs to foster a sense of community.
- Ease of use/Accessibility: The UI needs to be easy to use and the materials need to be accessible to all.

#### *Pros:*

- Reduces students' commuting time – is a more efficient and productive use of students available time for learning
- Sustains teaching/learning during illness/bad weather etc.
- Compared with fully online, engagement/community is easier to maintain because some parts are in-person
- Convenient – students can plan around other work/life commitments
- Self-directed online helps students develop essential digital literacy skills
- Can accommodate a variety of teaching and learning preferences
- Increases a sense of personal responsibility for one's own learning
- Online element can provide access to a huge variety of resources
- Works well for students who may not thrive in fully in-person classes (e.g. introverts)

#### *Cons:*

- It is difficult to create and sustain engagement for the online components
- More difficult to create a community of learners. Students can feel isolated
- Lack of personal contact with the instructor – limited options for instructor feedback. Harder to get to know the students in a course
- Less instructor support: Students have to figure out some things on their own
- The online course shells need to be well designed and organized. High development time to create online materials – asynchronous content can take a long time to develop and can be complex (e.g. online rubrics)
- Instructors often aren't trained/oriented in using the software tools required to teach online/blended
- There can be a lack of balance – e.g. too many asynchronous activities
- Danger of an 'application gap' if students don't complete necessary pre-work before attending an in-person session
- Plagiarism: It is hard to know if material submitted online by a student is an accurate snapshot of their ability. Too much access to online tools to enable plagiarism.
- There is less time for students to practice skills with their classmates. It is harder for the instructor to create and manage groupwork online.

- Students may rush through the self-paced online materials to 'get them done' rather than engage with the content for learning
- Instructors are less able to troubleshoot/hand-hold in the moment when compared to fully in-person delivery

Q2: Can you talk about your sense of your students' engagement in a blended course you've delivered?

*Emerging themes:*

- It's harder to measure how engaged students are in an online/zoom session, especially if the instructor can't physically see them.
- Measuring engagement in self-paced activities requires that the instructor creates a lot of knowledge checks to test that the students have engaged with and understood the materials
- In-person classes were generally more engaging than online
- It can be a challenge getting students organized to deliver assignments etc on time
- Regular prompting/feedback from instructors is required to keep engagement levels high
- It's easier to keep engagement levels high with smaller class sizes

*Factors leading to high engagement:*

- Delivering the online component of a blended course synchronously helped with engagement
- Using multiple means of engagement helped
- Engagement was higher in synchronous sessions that used games and tools like Jamboard
- If an activity was required (completion was required) then engagement was high
- If an activity carried a grade then engagement was high
- Breakout rooms led to higher engagement in Zoom sessions
- Shorter Zoom sessions (<2 hours) led to greater engagement
- Students really engaged with/appreciated recorded lectures

*Factors leading to low engagement:*

- Less able students struggled more with engagement in online components of the course
- Students cameras tended to be off in Zoom sessions, leading to disengagement
- It was hard to get everyone to participate in a Zoom session
- If activities were optional, engagement was lower
- Students were sometimes keener to finish early than to take time to practice what they had learned

Q3: What was your experience with your students focusing on their studies in a blended course you've delivered?

*Emerging themes:*

- A perceived higher drop-out rate if students couldn't get the help they needed
- If students aren't able to keep up with the workload they tend to drop/ignore the non-graded asynchronous elements of a course



- To stay focused, students need to understand their role in the learning process and to be accountable for their learning
- Independent learners exhibited a higher degree of focus
- It is harder for instructors to identify and help students struggling with focusing on their studies in the online component of a blended course

*Factors leading to increased focus:*

- Keeping online synchronous sessions short
- Providing 1:1 support as part of the online synchronous session (e.g. at the end of a Zoom session). Students preferred to ask questions in the Zoom session than via forums
- Leaving the Zoom Room open so that students can use it for group study outside of the scheduled online synchronous class time
- Adding study/prep time to the course calendar
- Having a close relationship between the online materials (e.g. theory) and the in-person materials (e.g. practical)
- Consistent and regular communication from the instructor led to greater clarity, direction and confidence.

Q4: Can you talk about the effect of blended delivery on meeting the learning goals of your course?

*Positives:*

- Blended delivery has helped to make in-person time more efficient, increasing achievement of those goals
- Blended delivery has made instructors find more innovative ways to meet the learning goals of the course
- Blended delivery pushes students to be more self-directed, which is itself a learning goal in many courses
- Blended delivery has helped shift from memorization of materials to application of knowledge
- Available learning metrics in the LMS (e.g. activity completion status) has helped instructors to intervene and help individual students meet their learning goals
- Asynchronous materials proved useful in meeting higher-level/more conceptual learning goals as they allow for repeat and practice
- Blended delivery allows for a wider variety of activities to meet the learning goals

*Negatives:*

- Instructors may not know if their learning goals are being met if the online testing isn't sophisticated enough. Instructors lack the time to plan and create more involved assessments online
- It's harder to meet learning goals that require collaboration or socialization
- Students who think blended/online courses are less work will struggle.
- Students with low IT skills may struggle
- Students who are not self-directed will struggle

## Recommendations

Based on the feedback from students and faculty, we can offer the following recommendations for the design of blended learning at VCC in the future.

### Course Design and Delivery

- Use a design framework such as Backward Design to help balance synchronous and asynchronous activities in your course, and to make sure both types of activity are aligned with the learning outcomes. Backward Design can also help to ensure that appropriate delivery formats are selected for each type of activity or learning outcome (e.g. theory-based learning self-paced vs task-based learning in-person).
- Pay attention to the flow of the course content – make sure that the self-paced and in-person learning is complementary. For example, use in-person time to discuss topics that students have been learning on their own time.
- As a department or program, develop an agreed ‘house style’ for your online courses. Consider creating a Moodle template or an exemplar course that can be used as a model each time new courses are created. Consider not just the ‘look and feel’ of the course (although consistency here is important), but also the way the course is structured.
- Make sure your course includes information on expectations – e.g. a course schedule, a statement of the grade weightings, assignment due dates, etc. Include rubrics and/or model answers to help your students understand what is expected of them in self-directed activities.
- Give the students regular practice opportunities. Make use of online formative assessment tools such as quizzes.
- Create pre-recorded videos to explain key concepts. These can include ‘talking head’ lecture-style videos as well as animations (e.g. using a tool like Powtoons), recorded PowerPoint presentations... Keep the videos short. A series of shorter videos works better than a single long video.
- Make sure all the resources and activities in your course are accessible. For example, use closed captions in all your videos, add ALT text for all the images in your course, and don’t create PDFs by scanning a document.
- Be interactive – whether synchronous or asynchronous, give students the opportunity to interact with each other and with the content of the course.
- Be selective in your use of synchronous online activities (Zoom sessions) – keep them as short as possible and allow breaks in longer Zoom sessions.
- When using Zoom, make use of polls, breakout rooms, whiteboards and other ways to make the sessions interactive.
- Consider having a ‘cameras on’ policy for synchronous Zoom sessions, but allow regular ‘cameras off’ breaks too.
- Consider setting aside a few minutes at the end of a synchronous Zoom session to check-in with how the students are doing with the self-paced parts of the course.
- Consider leaving your Zoom Room open so that students can use it for group study and to interact with one another outside of scheduled Zoom sessions.

## Student Preparedness and Engagement

- Give your students early access to the course schedule so they can plan around other commitments.
- Be mindful of your students' other commitments when planning a program of courses. For example try not to have assignment and assessment dates all at the same time, but try instead to spread the workload across the program. Likewise, try to avoid requiring students to commute frequently from home to campus and back – plan on-campus activities thoughtfully so that students can make full use of on-campus time.
- Early in the course, make sure you communicate expectations to your students for managing their own learning (expected hours of self-study, for example).
- Early in the course provide an opportunity for students to get to know each other – an ice-breaker, an 'introduce yourself' forum, a teambuilding activity.
- Encourage student feedback during and at the end of the course, and make use of the feedback to improve the course for the next cohort of learners.

## Instructor Preparedness

- Make use of the self-study tools for instructors that are offered by CTLR. These include the Training Map of short courses and the Knowledge Base of just-in-time how-to resources.
- Know where to get help when building your online courses.
- Become familiar with Universal Design for Learning and the ways you can make your courses accessible to all.
- Commit to trying one new thing each time you deliver a course (e.g. you might try creating H5P interactivities, or converting your static text resources into a more interactive format).
- Make sure you are familiar with the way synchronous technology (e.g. Zoom) works prior to using it with your students. Practice with colleagues to make sure you know how to manage breakout rooms, polls etc.
- Have a backup plan for when things go wrong – if your Zoom connection fails, do you have a place to send your students to work on their own until you can resolve the issue? Do you know where to find technical support?

## Instructor Presence

- Be available to answer student queries (e.g. by email or Moodle message) at regular and predictable times.
- Post these times to your online course.
- Check-in regularly with activities such as forums and chats.
- Use Moodle's analytics (e.g. activity completion reports) to identify and follow-up with students who may be struggling.
- Make use of the various student contact mechanisms available in Moodle – messaging students directly, messaging all students in a course (e.g. via a News Forum).
- Provide regular constructive feedback to student submissions.