Issues and strategies in intensive offshore teaching

This document has been put together from comments and discussions amongst staff involved with intensive offshore teaching and learning contexts. The handout, “A support guide to quality teaching and learning, and travelling, experiences for students/teachers/administrative personnel involved with intensive offshore teaching,” is simply that – a brief synopsis of points that people need to think about when working in intensive offshore teaching and learning environs.

The focus of this document is to highlight strategies that may be used to combat some of the T&L issues raised in the handout, when issues are addressed this is done to contextualize the discussions around strategies. This document does not address personal needs, first aid kits, or travelling tips when working offshore.

Phase 1: Pre-Planning

“Pre-planning is the single most important thing in relation to effective course delivery over an intensive period.”

Issue – reflective time. There is no reflective time in intensive teaching contexts. You can’t go away and think: “Oh, I’ll go back over that next week. You have to get it right first time, when you are there. This means that you have to be flexible and adaptable in your teaching style, methods and approach. (Experienced offshore teacher, April 2004).”

Strategy – Plan for everything that you can control, this will allow you to be less anxious about those things that you cannot control.

Question – How do you know what you can control?

Answer – Ask questions, communicate, reflect on what you can and cannot control in your local classroom.

You have control over:

- Making yourself known to your host institute.
- Exploring what resources are available to students. They may have access to computers but is the internet connection reliable or erratic?
- Communicating with your offshore partner. Identifying needs that you might have; identifying your expectations of where students should be; clarifying their expectations of you; asking what resources are available to you.
- Finding out from your host what they expect you to be teaching – asking them how this fits into the overall program(s) that students will be enrolled in.
- Finding out from your host: when you will be teaching, where, hours, resources that students should have, resources that you will need to take, any deadlines for providing materials to be printed/photocopied/or delivered electronically, and procedures for accessing photocopier ID numbers, library passes, building/security passes.
- Finding out from your host how the students are used to learning.
- Finding out from your host, and colleagues, what the students are bringing to classes. What prior knowledge will they have that will help them to open up discussions, localize examples. Reflect on what knowledge students might have that will be of use to you in supporting students to open up to new learning opportunities. Make notes of these reflections and take them with you. Build them into your intensive curriculum.
- Preparing possible teaching scenarios that synthesise possible student knowledge with your curriculum.
- Talking to experienced offshore staff about how they have taught students – remember that the T&L practices that students are used to aren’t necessarily what they need.
- Finding out from your host what students are doing prior to coming to your intensive teaching course, i.e., will they be coming straight from work.
- Preparing T&L activities that will explore your ideas about where students are in relation to your proposed curriculum. Practicing these in your local classroom and getting feedback from local students.
- Exploring possible strategies that you may need to employ to keep students awake during long periods of teaching and learning in intensive offshore courses.
- Reducing anxiety about whether teaching materials will be available and ready for you when you arrive at the offshore partner. That is, keep electronic and hard copies of your materials in your hand luggage. Forward electronic copies to partners/teaching institutes before departure. Get confirmation of their arrival and accessibility.
• A lack of familiarity with the library/teaching resources of the offshore partner. Take everything that you need for your course with you. This includes: videos, case study materials, blank overheads, white board markers, pens, online quizzes, and/or make thoroughly sure that these materials are available upon your arrival.

In all of the above instances consult RMIT staff that have taught/visited the offshore partner in the past. For example, will keeping students awake in class be an issue for you? Reflect on what you need to conduct, over a semester, the equivalent course of study at RMIT, list everything that you need and then methodically use this as a check list to prepare for intensive teaching offshore.

Phase 2: Teaching

Issue - “How can I achieve comparable learning outcomes between students doing a 13 week course and those doing an intensive offshore course?”

Strategy – Know what the most effective means of getting information across to the student body are, and what the most effective teaching methods are in relation to the specific learning context that you will be working in.

Question – “How do I make the intensive teaching and learning context effective so that every second counts?”

Answer – “Be mechanistic. There is nothing esoteric and mystic about effective teaching and learning environments, on the contrary they are quite bland BUT very well planned.”

Planning for an effective teaching and learning environment for intensive offshore teaching.

• Know your curriculum – what are its key aspects, secondary aspects? How do these points link together? If you remove an aspect of the curriculum will these points still link? Will this link be obvious? Yes – then that part of your curriculum is not primary

• Instead of basing your teaching program around “topics” base it around key points/concepts/ideas – remember it is these aspects, and their relationship to each other, that you want the students to grasp.

• When you develop an assessment for your local students what are the salient criteria that you are looking for? Build teaching and learning practices for your intensive offshore students around these criteria.

• Be aware of student expectations. Are they different from yours? Will students resent you walking around the classroom? Will they feel that you are ‘wasting their time’ by asking them questions? What happens if they are reluctant to participate in discussions? What happens if you feel pressured to provide information rather than promote learning? Discuss these concerns with colleagues and your offshore contact.

• Emphasize to students that importance of grasping the key aspects of the course – give students these aspects as “information”. Then spend the rest of the intensive course asking students to relate what they are learning to these key aspects. For example, “what have you learnt in the last X hours? How does this link to Aspect 1, 2, 3,?”

• Consider an introductory session where you discuss learning strategies that include opportunities for students to monitor their learning.

• Emphasize critical aspects of the curriculum but don’t leave secondary aspects to chance. Build them into your teaching and learning program. For example, explore students full time program to see if there are secondary aspects that you might be able to touch upon. Discuss this with your on and offshore colleagues.

The most salient aspect of making an intensive offshore course comparable to a 13 week semester course is being able to dissect your curriculum. You need to rethink your curriculum, including your learning activities, outcomes and assessments, in the form of primary and secondary information.

Phase 3. In the intensive offshore classroom

Issue – To many unknowns in the intensive offshore classroom, class size, cultural differences, teaching language and accent – how do you plan for all these unknowns?

Strategy – Practice a student centred teaching and learning methodology.

Question – what is a student centred (SCL) teaching and learning methodology in the intensive offshore classroom?

Answer – Its ethos is the same as the domestic classroom: start from where your students are, connect to their fears and anxieties, create teaching and learning opportunities that are engaging, interactive, fun, relevant to the students’ experiences and assist students to own the curriculum.
SCL requires preparation, the dot points below offer some strategies to assist you to practice SCL in intensive offshore courses.

- Commence your SCL practice when you first meet your students. Introduce yourself in a light-hearted way, introduce your family using photographs. Encourage students to introduce themselves to their colleague on their right. Remember, first impressions do count.
- Acknowledge cultural difference (in particular power distance, uncertainty, avoidance, “face.”) and its relationship to different learning styles, how will this relationship impact upon the classroom? Talk to colleagues who have taught offshore. For example, in Hong Kong most secondary students experience teacher-centred education, and are not encouraged to participate in class discussions. The HK secondary education policy has changed in the past five years, however, Australian teachers’ experiences suggest that students still expect a teacher-centred model of teaching (Cathy Hall, May 2004).
- Be prepared for large groups – lecturing to two lecture theatres via video link-up from one theatre is not uncommon. You may need to perform as much as you talk. Try to engage students via examples – leave the lectern and walk/sit amongst them.
- Localize a curriculum to support student interaction. Use examples/case studies from local newspapers/media in the course. Try and access local papers prior to your departure.
- Localize discussions by using student knowledge of the country/area. For example, ask students where the best eating places are. Reflect on your experiences with students at the next session.
- Connect to students through localized examples, is there a theme that is relevant to the course and the students everyday experiences? E.g., Singapore Airlines proposed takeover over Air NZ was a useful theme for teaching staff to explore in Singapore, while it was current, in courses as diverse as marketing, management, and accounting.
- Be aware of your accent, pace of your speech, and your teaching language. Talk to students slowly, use overheads/handouts/power points, to explain key aspects of the course. Remember that while time is your enemy, time and comprehension are the students’ enemies.
- Prepare for misinterpretations. At the end of each session ask students to recap what the key points of the session have been. Do their learning outcomes meet yours? Have they learnt what you had expected them to learn?
- Learning should be fun, we don’t learn much when we are filled with fear, apprehension and anxiety. Be open about making mistakes. Try and pronounce words in the students’ language. Let them know that to speak to another language, let alone study in a second language, is a very difficult thing to do. They should be commended for it, not feel embarrassed about incorrect pronunciation. This will encourage students to interact with you and each other, and discuss material.
- Help students digest information. Organize discussions to follow directly on from lectures. For example, a two-hour lecture could be followed by a smaller group tutorial/demo lecture. Organize “tutorials” in your lecture theatre. For example, suggest that students group themselves in groups of 10 and tackle a particular aspect of the lecture. Give students different aspects so that when they report back a number of aspects of the curriculum had covered. Such teaching and learning practices provide instant feedback for the teacher and the student.
- Connect to students’ fears, anxieties, and anticipation. If you feel nervous and excited about teaching in new contexts then let them know this. If you are feeling it, it is more than likely that your students will be feeling it, too. While language and cultural norms can promote barriers between diverse cultures, feelings can often provide level playing fields.
- Connecting to your own fears may give you an insight into how you would prefer to teach. For example, it may appear more comforting to simple practice teacher-centred (TCL) teaching and learning methods and deliver, in linear fashion, the content of your course. This would certainly afford you a lot more control than SCL methods and reduce the number of unknowns in the classroom. It will also reduce the effectiveness of the learning opportunity for you and the student. In short, TCL means that we do not have to engage with the burden of learning and nor do our students. What we want is not always what we need and the same applies to students.
- Reduce anxiety by introducing teaching and learning resources early. For example, the DLS, electronic links, reading packs. Find an article in the host library’s data bases early in the week to remind students how to locate material. Refer to the teaching resources throughout the course.
- Be prepared to challenge students’ expectations, and desire, for a linear model of teaching and learning (TCL): you speak, they listen. Experienced offshore teaching practitioners suggest that the unilateral model of delivery is not the most effective way of transferring information to students in intensive courses. Neither is it the most rewarding way of teaching for you. Discuss SCL methods with your colleagues and students. With the latter try and direct the debate towards success in learning (the process) rather than success only
in relation to an outcome (the exam). For example, One teacher notes how they ask students to consider their intensive course as a “Chinese banquet”. There will be lots of food, but if students take one mouthful at a time, they will digest the food well and be able to enjoy the vast array of foods that the banquet offers (Cathy Hall, May 2004). Gorging (trying to memorise) on the food (course) means that you do not enjoy the banquet. Enjoyment (learning) takes place when an array of foods is tasted and digested.

- An example of an interactive model in offshore intensive accountancy teaching includes:
  
  1. **Localizing case studies.** Students are asked to develop a case study of a current issue using a particular process in the classroom. This provides you with local knowledge and an opportunity to evaluate what they have learnt. Consult staff at your partner institute about relevant case studies.
  
  2. **Small group presentations to the class – which will exceed 100.** Be supportive of students, encourage them to present to their class mates, be liberal with their interpretations of your teaching. Keep the presentations humorous, interactive, and fun. Focus on the group and not on individuals.
  
  3. **Break the class into small groups and give each group an overhead.** Ask each group to draw a flow diagram of an accounting process. This has to be presented to other groups, and they ask questions about it.
  
  4. **Short videos followed by discussions.**
  
  5. **Online quizzes.** Use web based publications which can be presented to students on a screen. These publications take the form of quizzes with true/false, yes/no answers. Get consensus answers from the class, and/or split them into groups allowing them small amounts of time, no more than 15 minutes to work through the quizzes. Then put solutions on to the screen. Ask one group to play the quiz against another, encourage groups to work together to develop an answer. Be light hearted about the answers and their discussions. Continually walk around the lecture theatre, encouraging, joking, supporting, but never criticizing groups’ attempts to answer a quiz. Encourage a time element and be the time keeper. Give small prizes (e.g., chocolate koalas).
  
  6. **A SCL approach will help you to keep students awake in class, and help students to keep themselves awake in class.** Many part time students attending intensive offshore courses are coming to classes after working an 8/9 hour day. E.g, they may work on Saturday mornings from 8/9 am until 1 pm, and then come to classes, 2 – 10 pm. Teaching models impact upon how the course is delivered. To help students stay awake in class: Don’t speak for more than one hour in a session.
  
  Let them walk around.
  
  Let them have a cup of tea.
  
  Chose an interactive teaching style over a one-way delivery model.

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**Phase 4. Leaving the intensive offshore classroom.**

**Issue** – managing learning after leaving the intensive offshore classroom.

**Strategy** – communicate. If there is going to be follow-up by a local lecturer, it is important to connect and discuss:

- Teaching philosophy – SCL v TCL.
- Approach to assessment and what is being looked for in the assessment. For example, understanding of issues rather than rote learning.
- Discuss using criteria assessment and provide the criteria to local staff. It maybe appropriate to provide these criteria to students, too.
- Include local staff in assessment design and construction. They will have a different perspective of the students from us. It is always useful to explore divergent perspectives as these offer insights into how students learn.
- Finding a balance between quality learning outcomes and equity is never easy, it is less so when there are language and cultural differences. Discussing your approach to teaching styles, learning, and your curriculum with local staff will provide more opportunities for finding this balance.
- Show trust in your local staff – encourage them to draft questions, set criteria, and check exam papers. Explore any differences in the criteria that you set and they set.
- Email contact with the local lecturer can be useful. It is useful to ask the for comments on students’ responses to assessments, e.g., was there a question that students did not understand?
- Find out if there are formal contact mechanisms between your school/department and the host partner/staff/students.
- Discuss with colleagues who have taught offshore what contact/follow-up mechanisms they use after they have left the offshore partner.
• Actively seek feedback from your host partner, local staff and students; actively give feedback to local staff, students, your colleagues, HoS, HoD. For example, what can be improved, what worked well, what you would do differently next time.

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