

eLearning lecturer workload: working smarter or working harder?

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Lecturers who move into the online learning environment often discover that the workload involved not only changes, but can be overwhelming as they cope with using digital technologies. Questions arise, given the dissatisfaction of lecturers with lowering morale and increasing workload, whether future expansion of this teaching component in tertiary institutions is sustainable. The challenge facing lecturers now, and in the future, is about learning workload management strategies which effectively manage the workload they encounter in the online learning environment. This paper describes a case study (which is a work-in-progress) examining the perceptions of online workload cf. face-to-face teaching of lecturers who are experienced in e-teaching. As well, it identifies strategies the lecturers have developed or adopted to manage this element of their workload.

Keywords: lecturer workload, workload strategies, workload management , e-teaching, elearning

eLearning lecturer workload – an overview of the literature

Literature specifically about elearning lecturer workload is relatively sparse and inconclusive. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, there are no systematic, comparable models for allocation of academic workload within or across tertiary institutions either in New Zealand or internationally. In some New Zealand universities a ‘rule of thumb’ workload approach seems to be a workload ratio for academic staff of 40:40:20 i.e. 40% teaching duties, 40% research and 20% administration. Tynan, Ryan, Hinton and Mills (2012) recently found that Australian universities have broad guidelines on workloads, and most have a workload hours allocation formula. However, none have comprehensive, detailed workload allocation models or workload allocation models that take into account the range of tasks which e-teaching requires. This study also found that “[work] overload due to e-teaching was a significant factor in staff dissatisfaction” (p.2). Secondly, there are wide variations in what is included in the category of elearning workload for lecturers. Some studies included generic technical support of students and other (generally) non-academic functions (e.g. Cavanaugh, 2005). Another variable to consider is whether course design per se should be included as part of the lecturer workload. Spector (2005) leaves it out of workload considerations, but Nichols(2008) notes that creating an online course (or one for hybrid learning) takes significantly more time than designing one for on-campus delivery. Thirdly, there are a wide range of other factors contributing to workload such as lecturer variables (e.g. high or low level of experience with elearning). Other variables include course type and design variables (e.g. blended learning or fully online, type and intensity of learning activities), and infrastructure variables (e.g. availability of instructional design and technical support). The pedagogy espoused by the lecturer (e.g. transmissive cf. constructivist) also influences workload. There is also the variable of class sizes - boutique post-graduate classes are very different from larger undergraduate classes. O’Hare (2011) reports of an Australian University course with a typical staff:student ratio of 1:75, being taught by part-time online tutors at 12 paid hours per week, i.e. approximately 9 and a half minutes per student per week.

Some of the available literature is, in some instances, ‘singular case’ experience of an individual lecturer – autobiographically-based on the experience of the paper’s author teaching a single course (e.g. Cavanaugh, 2005). Other instances are case studies involving small numbers of staff (e.g. Donaghy and McGee, 2003). More recent studies (e.g. Conceição and Lehman, 2011, and Tynan et al., 2012) are now emerging which report on interviews with larger numbers of lecturers (38 and 88 respectively). These studies are beginning to provide some breadth to complement the depth of previous studies.

In general, the literature that indicates the online workload is less than teaching face-to-face (FTF) classes (e.g. DiBiase, 2000) is the exception. A number of writers conclude workload is about the same as teaching face-to-face classes (e.g. Thompson 2004, Anderson and Avery 2008). A recent study by Van de Vord and Pogue (2012) indicates slightly more time per student for FTF classes, but more time is spent online evaluating student work. Most other studies maintain that the workload is considerably more than teaching face-to-face classes (e.g. Cavanaugh 2003, Shaw and Young 2003). Visser (2000) and Tynan et al. (2012) concluded that more time is needed to teach online than in a purely face-to-face setting.

To sum up, because of the relative scarcity and variability of the literature, only tentative conclusions can be drawn. However, the current literature tends to support the hypothesis that elearning lecturer workload is at least the same as teaching face-to-face, but more likely to be greater than similar face-to-face teaching.

eLearning lecturer workload management strategies

Given that the addition of an elearning component to a lecturer's workload maintains or usually increases that workload, the interest of this research is in the strategies that lecturers who are experienced with elearning employ to manage that component of their workload.

Nichols (2008) addresses this topic in a section of his e-Primer series written as a handbook for lecturers new to elearning. Included in the handbook is a study by Ragan and Terheggen (2003), which outlined a more detailed set of strategies based on an e-teaching professional development course for lecturers at Penn State University. An example of a more recently published, comprehensive study examining workload is that of four Australian Universities contained in the Out of Hours project report (Tynan et al., 2012). Conceição and Lehman, (2011) provide, in their recent book, an example of a research-based approach to online workload management using a survey of 38 participants with 14 follow-up interviews. Some elearning workload management literature addresses this theme in an anecdotal way, usually based on the personal experience of the authors – the 'tips and tricks' approach (e.g. Paloff and Pratt, 2001, Boettcher and Conrad, 2010).

However, further research to explore elearning workload strategies is justified for several reasons. Firstly, research may uncover new workload management strategies as well as confirm the usefulness of existing strategies from the contemporary experience of practitioners. Secondly, publication of the research can help to disseminate these workload strategies to provide pragmatic assistance for new and experienced lecturers.

Research questions, design and progress

The purpose of this research is to investigate the question of workload management for lecturers who are engaged in online teaching. Specifically the hypothesis is that lecturers who are experienced with online teaching will have developed a range of strategies for managing this component of their workload. The research question is: What are the effective work practices of experienced e-learning teachers which enable them to manage the workload of online programmes by working smarter not harder?

Case Study methodology

This research uses a case study methodology. Yin(2003) defines a case study as an empirical enquiry which researches a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, particularly when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident. A limitation of the research is that selection of the lecturers was purposive and from a single institution, using the criteria that "cases are hand-picked for a specific reason" (Lewin, 2005:219). The case is of volunteer lecturers experienced with online learning from a New Zealand university, participating in a semi-structured interview. Workload strategies identified in the interviews are compared with the strategy framework outlined by Ragan and Terheggen(2003).

Job descriptions and workload allocation models

In terms of formal job descriptions, none of the lecturers interviewed so far have any clauses indicating that e-teaching is part of the lecturers' workload. As all had been employed at the university five years or more (some over 20 years) this is not surprising. Most new academic job descriptions as advertised since 2011 do have a standard statement covering this component. Only one faculty (out of seven) has a workload allocation model which takes into account workload hours allocations for different elements of the job. This workload allocation model included a higher weighting to acknowledge that elearning involved an increased workload.

Workload comparisons

Interviews completed so far have confirmed the tentative conclusions of the current literature in terms of elearning lecturer workload. That is, the perception of all but one of the lecturers is that either equivalent time or more time is invested in elearning than learning delivered by face-to-face teaching. Some lecturers report the workload as being similar, but 'chunked' differently – online workload being experienced in smaller, more frequent time slots than face-to-face teaching commitments. One lecturer commented that it was easier to teach fully online than a mixture of online and face-to-face classes. Another lecturer commented that the major time investment was in setting up the course, but after that the time spent facilitating was reduced cf. face-to-face classes.

Workload management strategies

There is also some consistency with several of the workload management strategies outlined by Ragan and Terheggen (2003); such as establishing a predictable routine for course interaction, and using an LMS (Learning Management System) to focus communication and interaction. Interestingly, several lecturers had a policy of refusing to answer student email, all course-related communication and interaction had to be via the communication tools available within the LMS. This was identified as a conscious workload management strategy to circumvent email overload, a problem noted in some of the earlier workload studies. However, lecturers also identified specific extra work created by using the LMS, for example the time required to upload individual assignment feedback files for large classes.

Several lecturers had a strategy of deliberately not interacting with students in courses outside of normal working hours. While they might 'lurk' or view discussions or other online activity in evenings or weekends, they resisted posting in order to prevent any student expectation that they were the '24/7 lecturer'. Other lecturers specified response times as part of the course orientation – they would respond within a certain time frame to postings, but not during weekends, for example. Regular attention to what's happening on the online course is identified by several as a key workload management strategy – 'little and often' being recommended as better than less frequent, longer time allocations. Interestingly, Ragan and Terheggen (2003) imply the importance of time management strategies as part of their workload strategy framework but do not explicitly list any specific time management strategies per se.

Another key component to managing workload for several lecturers was advance preparation of online courses, learning activities and resources. While 'just in time' alterations were sometimes necessary, teaching workload was considered to be much more easily managed if the course was completely or substantially ready before the course was opened for student interaction. One lecturer identified the importance of trying to "see the course as the student sees it" so students weren't confused, anxious and unclear about what they were meant to be doing. He concluded that for him, this was "managing my workload by good course design".

Coaching and mentoring

The most important way that lecturers reported they had learnt these workload management strategies was from being mentored by a more experienced colleague and/or co-teaching an online course with a more experienced colleague. One lecturer gained insight into workload management from detailed recording of her online activity and reflecting on time spent on different tasks. Others reported working out strategies by trial and error for themselves. Attending professional development workshops and courses was mentioned by two as beneficial.

Innovative management strategies

Some practices outside of the scope of the strategies outlined Ragan and Terheggen (2003) have also emerged from the interviews. These include simple but effective 'do not disturb – I am teaching' signs on office doors while working online; time blocked out in online staff calendars for this purpose; and phones diverted to voicemail to enable complete focus on the e-teaching task. Some lecturers informed new online students of 'phone-in' times when they are available for phone help or advice, allocating a short, specified time during normal working hours. Lecturers also reported workload strategies which involved encouraging students to help students –for example having a discussion forum 'Questions for Anyone' where students answer each other's queries. Another strategy reported was the '3 b4 me' protocol – that lecturers would wait for at least three responses or concurrent queries before replying, to see if students could problem-solve the issue for themselves without lecturer intervention. One lecturer notified students of different lecturer response strategies specific to different discussion forums; responding regularly to most postings; providing a summative summary only; appointing a student moderator who facilitated and summarised postings. Another lecturer used podcast audio feedback for students as an efficient and personal way of providing feedback on assessments.

Summary and conclusions

The workload management strategies discussed during interviews so far represent tactics employed by experienced teachers to manage their workload – but not always within the conventional working hours of the five-day week. Most lecturers acknowledged the overflow of work into 'out of hours' time was probably inevitable. However, they noted this typically involves other aspects of the teaching job as well as elearning (for example, marking assignments and exams). The pressure of elearning workload forcing lecturers into the role of the '24/7 professor' remains problematic, but not insoluble. Other strategies may emerge from further interviews, and more thematic analysis of the interview discussions is currently on-going. However, it must be remembered that at least part of the future and sustainability of elearning depends on lecturers managing their elearning workload effectively so that they don't 'burn out' from workload demands.

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Please cite as: Bright, S. (2012) eLearning lecturer workload: working smarter or working harder?

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