

# Teaching on the Block: an exploration of university educators' experiences of block teaching in higher education contexts

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## Abstract

This article presents case writing research that explored the pedagogical benefits of teaching in Block mode through a university educators' perspective. The authors of this research examined their tertiary teaching experiences of Block Model delivery. Through two teacher-authored cases, the researchers engaged in a collaborative practitioner research framework to critically reflect on their own teaching experiences in Block Model to uncover and examine the patterns occurring across iterations of various deliveries. The aim of the research is to examine approaches to teaching and learning in Block and unearth the pedagogical changes required to effectively teach in Block. The aim of this paper is to contribute to our understanding of Block delivery from a teacher perspective and examine the benefits to teaching and learning experienced through Block model delivery. The findings suggest that the systematic foundation of Block delivery, coupled with the immersive nature of Block led to a range of pedagogical benefits such as an enhanced sense of belonging, increased notions of student agency and it promoted scaffolded instruction. The hope is that this classroom-focused research will provide the basis for further research and refinement of Block teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** Block model, teaching and learning, immersive, pedagogical innovation, higher education

## Introduction

### What is block teaching?

Transformations in higher education driven by economic factors, changing student cohorts and changing student demands have prompted institutions to seek innovative methods of delivery. During the past five years higher education institutions have increasingly explored alternate delivery modes to transform approaches to teaching and learning driven by student demand for better outcomes (Turner et al., 2021). Block Model delivery offers new ways for students to undertake their studies and provides flexible delivery modes to fit with students' complex lives. Block Model teaching is not new to Higher Education contexts and was pioneered by Colorado College in USA around 25 years ago where all units at the institution were delivered in block format. Block teaching is defined by Cawelti (1994) as "a daily schedule that is organised into larger blocks of time (more than sixty minutes) to allow flexibility for a diversity of instructional activities" (cited in Davies, 2006, p. 3). A defining feature of block scheduling is that student's study one unit at a time in an intensive and immersive format. This approach differs to a traditional "semesterised" model where students complete several units at once across a semester period. Hence, units are delivered in entirety within a short timeframe resulting in no competing timetable demands, allowing students to focus deeply on the unit content.

### **Intensive teaching formats**

A review of the literature pertaining to intensive teaching formats by Davies (2006) found that intensive teaching models proved effective and have ‘demonstrable advantages overall’ (p.3). Davies (2006) suggests that intensive teaching formats can offer many benefits, such as greater flexibility, increased focus and improved retention of content and material. Significantly, Davies (2006) highlights the importance of effective planning and implementation in ensuring the success of intensive teaching formats. Scott (2003) outlines students’ valuing the intensive course classroom environment as one that facilitated “increased classroom interaction”, formation of “deeper classroom relationships, which resulted in a greater degree of comfort, camaraderie, and classroom community” (p. 36). Noting the dependence on educator qualities and teaching and assessment methods, Scott (2003) suggests that intensive courses promote active participation from students and strong classroom relationships.

Importantly, Dixon and O’Gorman’s (2019) research into Block teaching found that academics need to adapt their teaching methods and be equipped pedagogically with the distinct nature of the new delivery mode. This finding is consistent with Daniel’s (2000) research, which found that teaching in this new format allowed teachers to foster and explore creative teaching approaches. Moreover, an investigation into intensive teaching and learning by Male et al. (2016) demonstrates that the immersive and intensive delivery model enhances student interactivity and facilitates real-world learning experiences.

It is important to note the challenges or limitations associated with condensed delivery modes. Scott’s (2010) research raises concerns regarding compressed, accelerated or condensed delivery modes, as academics express apprehension about potential compromises to academic rigour and learning outcomes in these condensed formats. Supporting this notion, Konjarski’s (2023) recent research comparing Block delivery across five institutions outlined some concerns about Block implementation from an academic’s perspective, including the perception of a tight turnaround of assessment and feedback increasing the academic’s workload (Konjarski et al., 2023). Further, in Oraison’s research (2020) academics raised concerns about the limited time to review, improve and update unit content due to the regularity of scheduled units.

### **The VU Block Model®**

This research reports on Block teaching at Victoria University (VU), Australia. Data gathered from the Department of Education and Training (2017), indicates that VU has the highest proportion of students from a non-English speaking background and the second highest proportion of low socioeconomic students of all the universities in the state of Victoria. Considering VU’s student cohort is uniquely diverse this prompted a transformational agenda to rethink effective learning and teaching. In 2018, as part of an innovative transformational agenda aiming to boost low performance indicators, student retention and student success, VU introduced a new model of course design and delivery. Through doing so the new model of higher education and what is now termed VU Block Model® (VUBM) replaced the traditional lecture style delivery methods delivered across a 12-week "semesterised" mode with regular, small group classes characterised by active learning methods. As Mc Cluskey et al. (2020) when articulating the desired outcome of Block implementation: “to improve student engagement, satisfaction, results and overall retention and enable students to successfully transition into active and life-long learners” (p. 62).

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As part of the VUBM students' study one unit at a time typically over a four-week period. The units are self-contained meaning all assessments occur within the Block period and feedback and results are disseminated within the four-week timeframe before embarking on the next unit. Each unit involves an early low-stakes assessment item which is used to provide immediate feedback to the student. Each unit is delivered in a supportive learning community of approximately 30-35 students with one facilitator, enabling for collaborative learning environments. The learning framework of VUBM consists of one unit a time, three times a week, three-hour duration each time. The fixed timetable accommodates the complexity of students' such as work, family and other commitments. As Mc Cluskey et al. (2019) highlight, the "Block Model recognises, respects and accommodates the complexity of student lives and facilitates a predictable, manageable and connected university experience" (p. 14).

At a classroom level, the VUBM prioritises student engagement and active teaching methods. As articulated by McCluskey et al. (2019), Block Model delivery is "flexible, immersive, inclusive and is designed specifically to provide excellent educational outcomes such as employability, retention and completion for the 21st century student" (p. 3). As part of the unique delivery model VU teaching staff are committed to facilitating learning experiences for students predicated on active and participatory classroom approaches rather than lecturing at students for long periods of time. The initial Block Model design principles highlighted "Student-centered, active and engaging" learning experiences (McCluskey et al., 2019, p. 10), articulating a shift in pedagogy. When discussing teaching and learning practices characterised in the VUBM, Konjarski et al. (2023) articulate "lectures are eschewed; each three-hour seminar follows a social constructivist approach where students are encouraged to research and create their own knowledge" (p. 9). This thinking alerts us to a shift in pedagogy required to effectively teach in Block Model whereby participatory teaching methods are used to ensure "active knowledge creation rather than a passive transmission of content" (Konjarski et al., 2023, p. 10). Whilst early evidence from VU suggests "immediate and ongoing improvement in retention, grades, attendance and student satisfaction" (Konjarski et al., 2023, p. 14), to date, not much research has been conducted on the perceived pedagogical benefits of Block delivery from a teacher perspective (Kobs, 2014). Akin to the call of Konjarski et al. (2023), this research aims to explore the factors of what the Block has to offer higher education.

### **Researcher background**

Both researchers have been teaching in Block Model at VU since the university wide implementation of the Block format in 2019. Since the transition to Block delivery in 2019 the researchers have taught greater than 60 classes in block mode combined. Through ongoing reflection, collegial discussion and professional learning, the researchers instinctively engaged in sharing and discussing their Block teaching experiences, specifically from the teaching perspective and started to make comparisons between their teaching experiences in semester mode compared to block mode delivery. They sought to identify patterns occurring across iterations of various deliveries to examine approaches to teaching and learning in Block and unearth the pedagogical changes required to effectively teach in Block. It is important to note that the cases described in this study are a representation of the patterns emerging at a classroom level. Much of the research undertaken thus far in relation to the VUBM has focused on the systemic impacts of Block delivery from an institutional level (Konjarski et al., 2023).

## Research questions

While earlier research at Victoria University examining the impacts of Block delivery has focused on student outcomes, student retention and attrition there is little research examining the experience of university educators' perspectives of Block teaching. This research seeks to provide an illustrative account of two university educators' perspectives of Block teaching to uncover the perceived pedagogical benefits of Block delivery and identify the core pedagogical principles inherent in Block teaching. The researchers have chosen to focus on the successful aspects of Block delivery to identify what approaches and strategies are working and why, with the aim to further refine and extend these approaches. The research questions framing this research are:

1. What are the perceived pedagogical benefits of Block teaching from a university educator perspective?
2. What are the core pedagogical principles inherent in Block teaching from a university educator perspective?

## Method

The qualitative research was conducted in the form of case writing research. In education research, case writing is a methodological tool used by teacher-researchers to examine their own teaching practice through a critical and reflective lens to think about and learn from experience (Shulman, 2002, p. 257). As explained by Shulman (2002) case writing provides researchers the opportunity to examine problem-based situations through multiple lens and various perspectives utilising a structured reflective inquiry process. Case writing provides a snapshot of teacher-researcher's reflections of their teaching practice with the view of developing an in-depth understanding of teaching practice.

Through writing about their teaching experiences, teacher-researchers can identify and reflect on teaching concerns and perplexities using writing as a tool to illuminate beliefs, explore problems and enhance reflective analysis. Richardson (in Richardson & St Pierre, 2008, p. 923) refers to writing as a method of inquiry, "a way of finding out about yourself and your topic", and states, "I write because I want to find out something. I write to in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it" (p. 924). By engaging in ongoing dialogue with oneself through case writing, teacher-researchers can better determine what they know and how they came to know. Case writing involves the in-depth description of a teaching event or what Geertz (in Guba and Lincoln, 1981) describes as "thick description". Thick description can emanate through case writing as the process involves a deep dive into a single teaching event evoking rich detail and description.

Cases from practice were the primary data source in this research project. Drawing from the work of Carr et al. (2015), case writing was used as a tool to enable us as teacher-researchers to become more informed of teaching approaches that lead to successful learning outcomes in Block delivery. In their research, Carr et al. (2015) found cases were a "powerful vehicle for evoking change that can lead to improved teaching and learning outcomes for the teacher educators involved" (p. 124). In this study we found the case writing approach allowed us to uncover "instances of a larger class of experiences" (Shulman, 1986, p. 11). The authors, as they crafted these cases, realised that instead of the cases being a singular instance of practice, they had composed cases that were representative of their Block teaching experiences over time. This approach allowed them to uncover and examine patterns aligned to Block teaching.

In addition to the writing of cases, the authors engaged in a collaborative practitioner research framework drawing on the notion of community of practice (CoP) from the work of Wenger et al. (2002). This allowed us to dissect our teaching practice in a critical and systematic way. Characteristics of a CoP were applied, the authors shared and discussed successes and tensions tied to Block teaching and sought to develop knowledge and expertise in the area by interacting and conversing on a regular basis (Wenger et al. 2002, p. 4). This CoP framework enabled engagement in professional conversations to unpack themes tied to pedagogy through a critical lens allowing for multiple perspectives and ideas to arise. Moreover, it provided moments for hidden assumptions or taken for granted teaching practices to be questioned and critiqued, opening opportunities to expose new ways of understanding our teaching practice. As Shulman (1986) states, “case writing serves as an occasion for reflection on teaching by the case authors, particularly in collaborative settings” (p. 250). The researcher's adapted the collaborative case-writing experience as per Shulman's work. Merseth (1996) directs us to the importance of collaboration when engaging with case methods and suggests, cases and case discussion methods must be conceived together, not separately. The synergy of the two is much too powerful to ignore.

### ***Data Collection and Analysis***

The collaborative case writing process and data analysis undertaken as part of this research project is outlined below:

**Phase 1.** The researchers were tasked with writing a single case of a critical teaching incident. The research design drew from a strengths-based approach and the cases focused on what is working in Block delivery and why as the intention was to uncover the pedagogical benefits of Block mode delivery. The researchers each wrote several cases of our own teaching experiences in Block. These were written as candid accounts of teaching events.

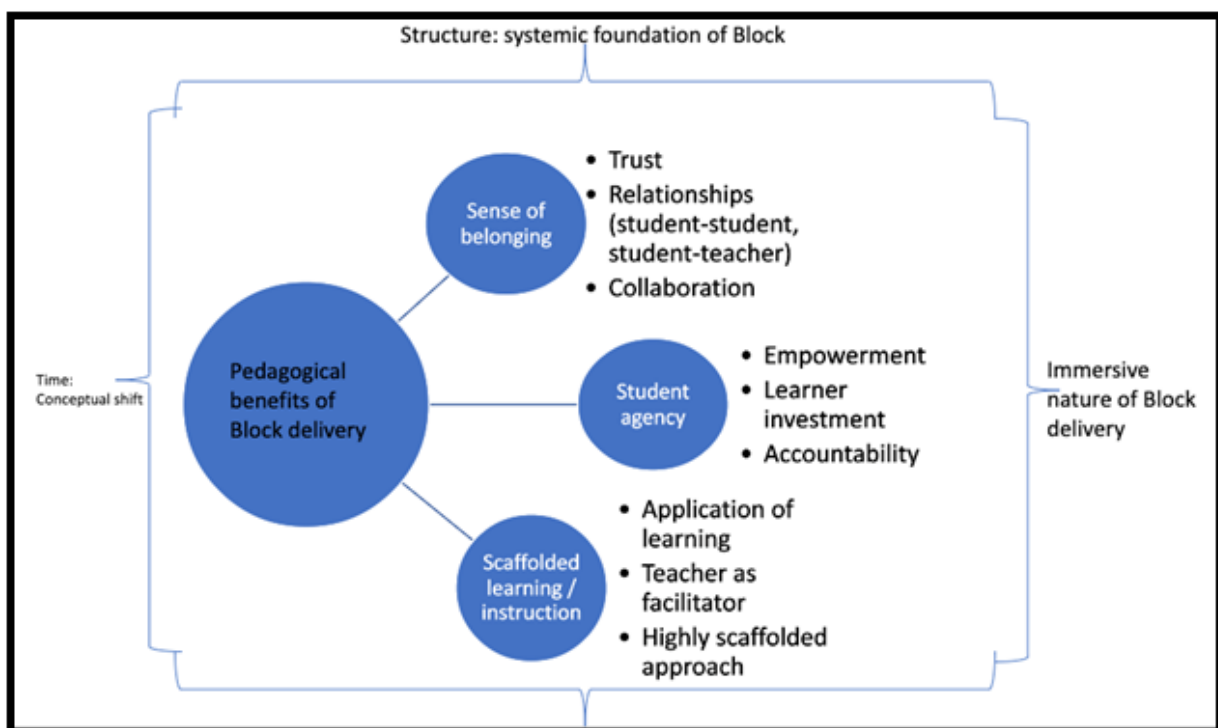
**Phase 2.** After writing several drafts of the cases the researchers handed the cases over to each other for collegial review, scrutiny, and affirmation. Reflective conversations occurred about the case in a dialogic and collegiate manner posing questions, seeking clarification, and offering perspectives and interpretations. The researchers engaged in a process of familiarisation reading as the first stage of the data analysis procedures utilised as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

**Phase 3.** After reading and discussing the cases the researchers engaged in a systemic and collaborative method of open coding to unpack the cases collaboratively and uncover the overarching themes that were embedded in the cases. Drawing from the CoP framework the cases were unpacked, and critical teaching incidents analysed through a series of reflective and collaborative conversations. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) inductive procedures, the initial codes were further refined into categories through examination of the relationships between the open codes. Through a process of discussion and consensus, the categories were developed into axial codes, and ultimately, into themes. Connections between the themes are presented in the findings below.

## Results

Analysis of the cases revealed an interplay between several of the pedagogical benefits of Block delivery and the themes including sense of belonging, student agency and scaffolded learning/instruction. The three themes were found to be interconnected and dependent on each other, with a strong sense of belonging contributing to increased student agency, and scaffolded learning providing a supportive environment for both. As can be seen in Figure 1, these were underpinned and sustained by the systemic foundation of the Block Model structure.

In this section, the key findings are presented related to these themes, which highlight the ways in which the Block Model structure can foster a supportive and empowering learning environment for students in higher education.



**Figure 1** *Visual summary of the key findings of the research*

### **Structure: systemic and immersive foundation of Block Model**

The Block Model structure provides the systemic foundation for the other themes, which can be compared to building a house. Just as a house is built from a blueprint, the Block Model is constructed from the arrangement of parallel units. Classes are concentrated in periods of learning, allowing for deep dives into topics and encouraging active learning and engagement with the course material, akin to the foundation of a house, providing the stage base for the structure.

The base structure of these concentrated periods of single unit focus yields an environment for an immersive nature of teaching and learning. The Block Model framework and scheduling of time enables conditions where students can fully engage and focus on learning. Time and intensity are often heard when discussing Block Model teaching and learning, often as partners in crime, as with them come connotations of deficits within the Block Model. The elusive relationship between time and learning typically suggests that more time equates to more

learning and teachers can often be heard commenting on the lack of time resulting in a lack of learning. However, Block Model teaching operationalises time differently to a traditional delivery model. The concept of time and its relationship with learning needs to be re-examined when delivering in Block.

The case studies discussed time as antitheses, including as hard-pressed for time and time as a luxury. Phrases such as “*tight timeline*” and “*not enough time*” discussed in the case study, reflect a perception of a lack of time and a potential mismatch between the traditional teaching approach and the intended approaches to Block Model pedagogical strategies. In contrast, productive phrases of time use were also discussed in the case studies, such as “*there is less time wasted*”, and “*less time needed on the ‘tuning-in’ activities*”. The authors therefore propose that within Block delivery often includes longer class periods, which allows for more in-depth discussions, exploration of concepts, and immersive activities that can promote deep approaches to learning and opportunities for critical thinking. The longer sessions encourage more active learning strategies which can promote opportunities for higher-order thinking and enhance the rigour of the learning experience.

This potentially requires a conceptual shift from the traditional way that higher education has been delivered and assessed, with an emphasis on collaboration, active learning experiences, and ongoing feedback. Aside from the notion that any change can be hard, a shift in pedagogical mindset can take some time to adjust to. As was discussed by the author in Case 1:

*“I have heard many of my colleagues, especially at the start of the transition period [into Block Model teaching], vent about the challenges...”*

It may be tempting for instructors to default to traditional teaching methods, such as lecturing, which can be more familiar and feel like they cover more content in a shorter amount of time. However, this may not be effective in the Block Model and could lead to a perception of a lack of rigour.

The Block Model structure has allowed for flexibility in the learning experience, enabling students to engage in additional exploration of concepts that may not have been planned for in advance. Case 2 author reflected on a moment of flexible learning:

*“One student brings a reading sourced from a recent edition of *The Conversation* and asks if we have time to read and discuss it in our session.”*

Although the Block Model lessons are highly structured and planned, an element of flexibility is available within the lesson afforded by the length of the sessions and the type of learning activities originally planned for. These moments allow for more *ad-hoc* discussions such as the one described, providing an opportunity for students to bring in outside sources, engage with current issues related to the course material, and ask questions. As a result, this allows for a more dynamic learning environment that is afforded by time.

### ***Scaffolded Learning***

If we return to the house analogy, the walls of the house can be compared to the scaffolded learning experiences that students receive in Block Model. Just as walls provide support and structure, scaffolded learning experiences provide students with learning frameworks, breaking complex concepts down into manageable parts and allowing for meaningful connections between concepts. This notion of scaffolded instruction arises in both written cases.

Discussions of the teacher releasing control of the learning, allowing for enhanced student ownership and control of the learning process was common. In Case 2 the author described the scaffolded instruction process as a shift:

*“The central role of the facilitator in Block is to provide careful scaffolding to allow for this shift in responsibility for learning to occur.”*

The shift refers to the onus of the learning gradually being transferred from the teacher to the learner. The author describes the shift occurring part-way through the unit delivery (approximately week 2.5 or 3 out of a four-week delivery) articulating that the scaffolded instruction afforded greater learner autonomy:

*“This leads to greater ownership, accountability, and higher levels of investment in the learning process”*

Similarly, Case 1 describes a typical trajectory of a single Block session whereby the teacher releases control of the learning throughout the duration of the session. The teacher systemically crafts experiences that gradually lead to the mastery of new learning and concepts. The scaffolded instruction challenges learners with thinking and tasks beyond their capacity and provides scaffolding through support, materials, and resources to build their capability, resulting in the learners taking greater ownership and accountability.

The findings illustrate how Block delivery affords the opportunity to craft learning experiences whereby students take what they learnt and apply it to a new situation. This leads to deep learning as mastery of learning happens when skills or knowledge are applied in new situations, problems or contexts. The author of Case 1 illustrates how the teacher carefully stages the learning, eventually releasing control of the learning and empowering the learners to apply the new information to a new problem. This application of learning occurs after a series of scaffolded steps such as explicit instruction and heavily guided discussion, jigsaw reading in small groups and the use of a graphic organiser.

The role of the teacher and their teaching practices are central to the Block Model learning experience. Strengthening the house walls of the scaffolded learning experiences is the house roof, aligned to the role of the teacher. Just as a roof provides protection, the teacher provides protection to the student’s learning experience. In Block Model teaching, the role of the teacher is more of a facilitator than a lecturer. This means that the teacher's primary goal is to create a student-centred learning experience, where the students take an active role in their own learning process. Rather than simply delivering information through lectures, the teacher works to guide students through the learning experience, facilitating discussion, asking questions, and helping students to make connections between course material and their own experiences. The teacher serves as a facilitator of the learning experience through guiding and mentoring, helping students to navigate complex topics and encouraging them to take ownership of their learning. The Block Model structure forces this facilitative approach to teaching, as a lecture-style teaching practice of standing in front of a 3-hour class for three times per week (as a minimum, sometimes the classes are longer and staff are teaching two Block units at a time) is a difficult undertaking. As discussed by Case 2 author:

*“...as a facilitator you can no longer stand and talk at students for 3 hours. This just isn’t possible in Block delivery. This pushes facilitators to pursue active learning approaches.”*



### ***Student Agency***

Student agency encompasses the interrelated concepts of empowerment, learner investment, and accountability (Cope & Kalantasis, 2012). The authors discuss these concepts through students gaining a sense of ownership and a sense of control over their learning. When students feel empowered, they likely to display initiative and take an active learning role in the learning process (Cope & Kalantasis 2012). As the Case 2 author suggests, the Block Model facilitates a space for this:

*“The Block Model offers students a space where they feel empowered to co-construct the learning alongside the facilitator. This leads to greater ownership, accountability, and higher levels of investment in the learning process.”*

Learner investment, as an element of agency, is similarly interwoven with the other themes, including a sense of belonging and relationships, and further discussed in the following section.

### ***Sense of Belonging – relational pedagogy***

At the heart of the Block Model approach is the recognition that building relationships are essential for effective teaching and learning (Pedler et al. 2022). By creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment, teachers can foster a sense of community among students and facilitate deeper engagement. Relationship building is regarded as a critical aspect of creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment that empowers student agency in learning (Pedler et al. 2022). In the case studies, the Block Model structure is discussed as the foundational affordance of relationship building for the teacher:

*“...there are opportunities to build deeper relationships... [which] promotes ‘buy-in’, engagement, empathy, and provides support for students and a shared power of teaching and learning.”*

This sense of ‘buy-in’ refers to the degree to which students are willing to engage with and invest in their own learning, increases with a sense of commitment and ownership. It includes an eagerness and readiness to actively participate in the learning. Creating this sense of ‘buy-in’ among students was discussed by the case authors through a range of pedagogical strategies, such as creating a sense of relevance and importance around curriculum, fostering a supportive and inclusive classroom environment, and providing opportunities for active learning and engagement. Students feel that they are valued, respected, and included in their learning/academic environment. This can involve feeling connected to other students and teachers, as well as feeling that their contributions and perspectives are valued and appreciated. As discussed by Case 2 author:

*“The sense of belonging and connectedness that is created in Block positions students to feel confident to take control and lead the learning. This involves strong and trusting relationships with the teacher but also with peers. High levels of social cohesion and collegiality are evident.*

Connectedness is also experienced through feelings of being part of the class network. That is, students feel connected together within the class system, having a sense of shared responsibility or interdependence with others. The Case 2 author describes this supportive and open learning environment in an interactive and reciprocal exchange of ideas:

*“The dialogic nature of communication allowing for more in-depth conversation that is; student-to-student and student-to-teacher rather than predominately teacher-to-student. This occurs because of the strong and trusting relationships and leads to higher levels of investment and interaction.”*

The Case authors present trust as a critical component of a successful student-teacher relationship. Trust is particularly important in the academic setting, where the traditional relationship between the teacher and the student is characterised by a power differential. When students trust their teachers, they are more likely to engage in the learning process, ask questions, take risks (Curzon-Hobson, 2002), and engage with feedback (Ajjawi et al., 2021). This, in turn, can lead to increased motivation and engagement in the learning process. Furthermore, trust between peers in a learning environment can foster positive and collaborative learning cultures, where students feel safe to share their ideas and perspectives. The Block Model structure promotes students working together in more frequent interactions that are closer together, which assists in building these relationships.

Collaboration is also presented by the Case authors as an enabler to student engagement in participatory learning experiences and building meaningful connections with peers. The authors present collaboration as a component of active learning, illustrated through examples of students working together in small groups to solve problems, peer teaching, and larger group discussions. Therefore, collaboration is interconnected with a sense of community and belonging. By working together, students develop a shared sense of purpose and collective identity. This can lead to increased motivation, as students feel accountable to their peers (Wenger et al., 2002).

## **Discussion**

Although this research is focused on two teacher-authored cases, the intent is not to generalise the findings to all implementations of Block Model but provide a stimulus to dive into the emerging research into Block Model pedagogy. The authors’ experiences of teaching in both traditional 12-week and Block Model designs have developed critical reflections of their higher education teaching and learning practices that have further emerged whilst teaching in the new format. As further experience with the Block Model is gained, a growing prevalence of these emerging patterns is observed. These key patterns of pedagogical thinking as connected to immersive, relational and transformative pedagogy will be discussed, followed by recommendations to support Block Model teaching and learning.

It should be noted that these discussed pedagogical opportunities are all possible in a traditional 12-week delivery model, however, the authors suggest that their potential is amplified by the Block Model due to its unique structural features which enable student-centred pedagogical designs. These pedagogical benefits are interconnected and dependent on each other.

### ***The possibilities within Block Model***

Compared to traditional 12-week teaching models, Block Model teaching and learning provides several advantages that are possible due to its unique structure. The concentrated and immersive nature of Block Model teaching allows students to focus more deeply on a given subject, as they are fully immersed in the unit/course for an extended period. As Scott (2003) suggests with other intensive courses, students undertaking Block Model do not have to prioritise one unit over another, ensuring that attention and effort are not disproportionately allocated. While the extended class times in the Block Model facilitate immersive learning

experiences, it is important to recognise that the mere increase in instructional time alone does not guarantee enhanced learning outcomes. Research by Karweit (1984) and Wlodkowski (2003) highlights that the relationship between time and learning is not unequivocal, and time itself is not sufficient to ensure optimal learning outcomes. Therefore, in addition to extended class sessions, other structural and pedagogical elements within the Block Model contribute to the demonstrated success of learners (Konjarski et al., 2023), emphasising the importance of intentional instructional design, learner-centred approaches, and active and immersive learning strategies.

### ***Transition encourages a shift in pedagogical thinking***

The transition to Block Model encourages a shift in pedagogical thinking by challenging the traditional university teaching model. This requires a shift in the way teachers approach teaching. Similarly experienced through the shift into remote delivery due to Covid-19 (Thomas et al., 2022), a shift of delivery into Block Model requires academics to look at their pedagogical approaches (Samarawickrema et al., 2020). Staff mindset and their readiness for change, play a crucial role in the ease of transitioning to Block Model teaching. Careful and considerate planning of the learning (Helfand, 2013), with diverse teams of experts to develop curriculum design (McCluskey et al., 2019; Samarawickrema et al., 2020), ensures quality assurance and rich learning experiences. Additionally, professional development and support for staff teaching in the Block is essential to the learning environment (Konjarski et al., 2023). Alongside this, perhaps a critical element to its success is the level of acceptance and commitment to the implementation and success of the model.

In their first paper introducing the Block Model at Victoria University, McCluskey et al. (2019) outline the foundations of the model, including the decision behind the design elements. The teaching cohort described by McCluskey et al. (2019), who facilitated the early development of the Block Model at Victoria University, were identified as "teaching-passionate" academic staff with a keen interest in supporting the development and implementation of a new First-Year Student Experience (p. 11). The authors recognise that adopting a new model of delivery would require a significant institutional shift in mindset, similar to that observed at Colorado College and Quest University (McCluskey et al., 2019). This institutional shift in mindset may be necessary to facilitate a smooth transition to this pedagogical approach, and contingent on the aptitude and proclivities held by teaching academics (Jackson et al., 2022). Moreover, reflections on time constraints to plan and prepare for Block teaching by Kops (2014) as well as Dixon and O'Gorman (2019) indicate that some academics in the Block Model face pressures of limited time, which may adversely affect scaffolded learning experiences within the Block structure.

### ***Frequency and pacing facilitate rich learning experiences***

The frequency and pacing of classes allow more concentrated and focused periods of learning in Block Model. The scheduling and structure appear to support a variety of pedagogical approaches that prioritise student-centred learning. This in turn emphasises an immersive nature of learning. Constructivist approaches to teaching and learning, which have influenced and moulded some aspects of higher education, are inherently linked to these teaching approaches. This notion of students as active learners is a key feature of constructivist approaches (Bada & Olusegun, 2015), where learning develops through cognition (Vygotsky, 1978). Students combine new learnings with those already obtained and make sense of knowledge as construction and not necessarily just passive obtainment (Phillips, 1995). Additionally, there is an importance placed on the social nature of knowledge construction, such as with social constructivism, where knowledge is a social construction through

collaboration with peers, teachers, and others (Palincsar, 1998). The Block Model encourages these collaborative learning environments where students work together to construct knowledge. The extended time spent in classes promotes sustained interactions, fostering the development of shared understanding, negotiation of meaning, and cooperative problem-solving connecting to the social constructivist approach (Palincsar, 1998). As was suggested in the cases, students can engage in peer teaching, feedback exchange, and collective knowledge construction, and are learning by “doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (Bonwell & Eison, 1991, p. 5).

These active learning pedagogies transform the traditional dynamic between teacher and student into a more collaborative and interactive student-centred environment (Graffam, 2007; Robertson, 2018). In this context, the teacher becomes a facilitator or guide, fostering a shift from a one-way dissemination of information to a dynamic exchange of knowledge and ideas among students themselves. The focus is on promoting peer-to-peer learning, encouraging active participation, and fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the learning process. The Block Model design principles emphasise these aspects of active participation, learner engagement and knowledge application (Samarawickrema & Cleary, 2021). The condensed structure and extended class time inherent in the Block Model create a conducive environment for fostering these collaborative active learning opportunities as the traditional lecture-style teaching approach becomes impractical, necessitating a shift towards more interactive and participatory learning strategies. This opens up opportunities for the implementation of learning activities that are driven by students, rather than passive learning experiences.

The Block Model, in its essence, should not necessarily be perceived as a substitute for existing pedagogical approaches but rather as a framework that can potentially support and strengthen implementation. The immersive nature of Block Model speeds up the ability to create and establish trusting and positive relationships between teacher and students, as well as among the students themselves. This emphasis on relational pedagogy is a notable aspect of the Block Model. The intensive time allocation in Block delivery, with teachers engaging in (at least) nine contact hours per week, enables them to establish a comprehensive understanding of their students’ identities, backgrounds, learning needs, and abilities within the first week. This heightened familiarity allows for responsive and adaptive teaching practices that can effectively cater to individual student requirements. The Block Model’s structure facilitates a quicker identification of students’ Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), enabling educators to grasp the optimal level of challenge and provide targeted support more promptly (Vygotsky, 1978).

### ***Creating conditions for a transformative pedagogy***

The points articulated above raise questions about the pedagogical implications of block teaching and resonate with notions of transformative pedagogy. Cope and Kalantsis (2012) point out that transformative pedagogy reimagines what education could look like in a moment of tremendous change. The authors argue that institutional and attitudinal changes are needed to adapt to the changing needs and demands of the contemporary world. As articulated above VUBM was predicated on the need for whole institution transformational change. The authors of this paper argue that due to the interplay of learning and teaching approaches Block delivery affords such as the immersive nature of the learning, the relational aspects of the delivery and the student-focussed nature of the delivery, this can create conditions that are more likely to reach a transformative pedagogical approach. Effective Block Model delivery requires a paradigm shift from traditional learning where a set of information is waiting to be acquired, to transformative learning where students are positioned as active knowledge and meaning

makers who develop knowledge through inquiry, action, or experimentation, often involving collaborative, peer-peer interactions.

The notion of a shift in learner responsibility from the teacher to the learner connects with notions of transformative pedagogy. Cope and Kalantsis (2012) discuss how a transformative pedagogy affords the learner greater share of learner responsibility. Learner voice is encouraged and celebrated through horizontal dialogue (as opposed to vertical dialogue). This occurs through a highly structured and scaffolded process. This results in increased student agency and engagement over the learning process. Cope and Kalantsis (2012) state that when drawing on notions of a transformative pedagogy this “helps to form the sorts of subjectivities that are effective in a world in which workplaces use teamwork and a self-motivating workplace culture to get the best out of people” (p. 10). This process affirms and extends students’ identities, is responsive to learner difference and importantly values learner difference. As evidenced in the findings of this research, in Block delivery, teachers can adapt their teaching materials, resources and content more readily to the learner needs and interests. Moreover, the high levels of student participation that underpin a transformative pedagogy shifts the process of learning to one where knowledge is created in an ecology of sociality and reciprocity (Cope & Kalantsis, 2012). When students have more voice and more agency in the learning process this leads to greater learner engagement.

As indicated above teaching strategies informed by a transformative pedagogy promote student empowerment. When fostering a transformative approach, where students take ownership of the learning, and are more invested in the learning process, it is argued that greater learning attainment can be achieved. Learning investment can foster learning motivation and engagement, which are crucial factors in learning attainment. When students perceive their learning experience is valued and supported, they are likely to invest time and effort in learning (Tinto, 2000). Students who are invested in their own learning are more likely to be motivated to learn and take an active role in their learning (Maehr, 2012).

Evidence suggests that students have demonstrated improved performance in shorter intensive courses (Austin & Gustafson, 2006), which is consistent with the findings at Victoria University (McCluskey et al., 2020). These outcomes indicate that there has been no compromise in academic standards. Scott (2003) attributes classroom connections to relationships and supportive environments to the success of these shorter units.

### ***Enhancing relational approaches to teaching and learning***

The teacher-student relationship seems to be evolving in higher education towards a partnership of the learning process, from centuries of Western university tradition that positioned the student as the passive recipient of expert wisdom. Teachers who prioritise fostering interpersonal connections with their students tend to enhance student engagement (Pearce & Down, 2011). A strong teacher-student partnership can enhance student “engagement and learning, personal development, positive relationships, and skill development/employability” (Ollis & Gravett, 2020, p. 13), and can positively influence engagement with feedback (Ajjawi et al., 2021). Additionally, Harris et al. (2018) found the contrary situation, that a relational disconnect can lead to students avoiding asking for help. Despite a perpetual hierarchical power imbalance favouring the teacher, there has been a fundamental shift in valuing reciprocity in student-teacher relationships in higher education (Karpouza & Emvalotis, 2019). That is, the meaningful relationship is co-created. Although the teacher may initially be in the driver seat, it is crucial to recognise the pivotal role of the student as an active and agentic being in the learning process (Felton et al., 2019).

The outcomes of using a relational approach to learning can differ based on the specific circumstances or environment in which it is applied (Ramsden, 1987). While it is acknowledged that smaller class sizes contribute to the enhancement of relationships between teachers and students (Jackson et al., 2022), it is important to recognise that this factor alone is not exclusive to the Block Model structure. Therefore, there must be additional elements within the Block Model that facilitate and augment these relationships. The condensed structure creates a unique space for building these relationships by facilitating regular and extended face-to-face contact. Other intensive formats have also allowed for enhanced staff–student interaction (Dixon & O’Gorman, 2019). Therefore, these distinctive features of the Block Model, in conjunction with smaller class sizes, contribute to the cultivation of strong and meaningful relationships between teachers and students.

To foster this teacher-student relationship, trust should be built between the teacher and student. This is important for a variety of reasons. One such reason is focused on student learning and the student feeling sufficiently comfortable to trust, take risks, and engage in critical dialogue to challenge thinking and progress learning. As stated by Curzon-Hobson (2002), without trust the student is not encouraged or “willing to question and overcome their understanding of their interrelationships in the world” (p. 266). Trust can create a sense of comfort for the student to share personal stories, experiences, and perceptions during the learning process to provide richness in the learning experience. Furthermore, to address the influence of the imbalance of power in the student-teacher relationship, trust can be developed through engaging in critical and ongoing dialogue to manage the dynamics between each level and pass some of the perceived power to students (McLean, 2018).

A sense of belonging is shaped by a range of social, cultural, and contextual factors. It involves feeling accepted and welcomed within an education community and having a sense of shared identity or common purpose with others. It is well documented in the literature that a strong sense of belonging correlates with higher levels of academic engagement and student success (Pedler et al., 2021). Block Model delivery promotes social cohesion due to the trust and reciprocity created by students with their peers and facilitator. The pedagogical benefits of Block delivery promote opportunities for students to develop a strong sense of belonging which promotes a positive correlation between academic achievement and academic enjoyment.

## **Recommendations**

The present study acknowledges the inherent limitations of being focused on a small number of case- writing studies, thus limiting the generalisability of the findings. Therefore, it is recommended that future research explores a diverse sample, including a multi-disciplinary approach. A comparison of students and educator experiences in different fields may provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the Block Model can be optimised within specific disciplinary contexts.

Based on the limited body of research into Block Model learning and teaching, it is evident that much of the research in this area has predominantly focused on examining the learning processes and outcomes from a systemic process perspective, largely overlooking the intricate dynamics within the Block Model classroom setting. Therefore, the authors recommend investigations that delve into this classroom and teaching perspectives to gain further understanding of the factors influencing learning.

To fulfill this recommendation, further research should aim to explore the micro-level interactions, instructional strategies, and pedagogical approaches employed by educators within the classroom. By investigating these factors, researchers can uncover valuable insights into the specific mechanisms and practices that contribute to effective learning experiences and outcomes for students. Additionally, this classroom-focused research will allow for a more fine-grained analysis of how various contextual factors, such as classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, and instructional methods, impact learning attainment.

It is also important to recognise that the challenges associated with the implementation of the Block Model teaching approach, including the aspects of transition, support, and assessment, warrant further investigation. As highlighted in the work of Jackson et al. (2022), particular attention should be directed towards scrutinising areas such as academic workload, ensuring consistency and coherence across courses, calibrating assessment, and providing rigorous and timely feedback. It is recommended that further research explores strategies for overcoming the various challenges in Block Model delivery.

Given the nascent stage of research on Block Model learning and teaching, it is unknown whether these Block Model methods lead to better long-term learning outcomes. Therefore, future research should focus on examining the enduring impacts of this teaching and learning model. By conducting longitudinal studies, the retention and transferability of learning outcomes may be more comprehensively understood.

## Conclusion

This exploratory research serves as a stimulus for further investigation in Block Model learning and teaching. It contributes to our understanding of Block delivery by offering insights from two teachers' perspectives, shedding light on the experiences and perspectives of educators implementing this pedagogical approach. By leveraging the benefits of the Block Model structure, this study seeks to explore learning and teaching experiences within its framework. Moving forward, several key recommendations have been identified to leverage the potential of Block Model delivery. However, it is evident that additional research is warranted to delve deeper into various aspects of Block teaching, such as its impact on student learning outcomes, effectiveness across different disciplines, and strategies to address potential challenges. Further research is needed to expand our knowledge and provide evidence-based insights in Block Model teaching and learning.

## Disclosures

No conflicts of interest, financial or otherwise, are declared by the authors.

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