

Block Essentials: A Better Way to Deliver Higher Education

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The Block has been a part of my life since May 2017 when, as part of a four-person Victoria University (VU) investigative team, I travelled to North America to see the model in action at Colorado College and Quest University. I was impressed, at that time, by the commitment of those involved in the model to the idea that education could (always) be better. That there was more to be discovered, that challenge was to be embraced, that a commitment to a questioning (Socratic?) approach to the way we educate not only held the power to transform student lives, but could also transform the idea of higher education itself.

Since then, it has been my honour and privilege to work alongside colleagues here at VU and overseas in the development of the VU Block Model[®], the establishment of IBILTA and J-BILT and the building of an international community of Block practitioners, committed to innovation, exploration and the maximisation of all this model has to offer.

A recent output of that community is the manuscript for a book entitled *Block Essentials: A Practical Guide*¹, co-edited by myself and my colleague, Loretta Konjarski, and featuring work by leading international Block scholars and practitioners: Michelle Anderson, Bethany Blankenship, Ellen Buck, Emma Davy, Leanne de Main, Naomi Dempsey, David J. Helfand, Sarah Jones, Pat McLaughlin, Annie Prud'homme-Genereux, Marc C-Scott, Andrew Smallridge, Ian Solomonides and Marjorie Wonham.

Block Essentials is a hands-on book designed to be of use to academics and administrators contemplating a move to the Block and to those already working within the model via practical advice drawn from the personal and professional experience of the writers. Each chapter focuses on the challenges and opportunities inherent in particular aspects of the model in action, from initial exploration, through institutional change, to the classroom and development and delivery of active and engaging Block learning and teaching.

In compiling the book, several themes emerged. Continually having to combat the myth that: "The block might work for you, your subject, your institution, but it won't work for me," was one that strung through most chapters. This reminds us of how small and relatively obscure the block-based teaching world still is, and how resistant to innovation and change the world of Higher Education (HE) is. It is hoped this book will help lift the profile of the Block and establish its bona fides as an educational approach.

More positively, there was a hunger among the writing team for more information on, not just the Block, but on ways that academics and administrators can shift the entrenched structure of

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HE towards a more student-centred model, whether that be the Block or not. This desire to do better aligns with a global push to improve HE, evidenced most visibly, in Australia, by the Federal Government's University Accord Program, which tasks universities with making *real* change for the better in the ways they serve their students and their communities.

This book is aligned with that global push, as much as it hopes to serve as a guide for the growing body of academics and institutions seeking to explore and implement the model, so does it seek to prompt those already working in the model to go further and exercise best practices.

Institutions pivot toward the Block because they want to do better. That they choose to implement the model demonstrates a commitment to critical and practical self-reflection essential to effective learning and teaching. More than that though, a move to the block is a challenge to tradition and the status quo. Not a challenge simply for its own sake, but rather institutions move to the block out of a genuine desire to find ways to improve, to do better by students, to transform lives through higher education. Institutions are encouraged to move to the block because of different circumstances, such as shifts in educational trends toward a more flexible delivery, demands of students for more experiential learning, financial exigency of institutions, and general developments in the higher education landscape that call for more relevancy of the curriculum.

The danger for those involved in this, and any other revolutionary work, is that what is initially conceived of as a ground-breaking challenge to previously unquestioned authority itself becomes ossified, set in its ways and eventually as riddled with assumptions and blind spots as that it replaced. Yes, there is a need for regulation, for standards and for principles and guidelines, but these must serve the intention to continually do better not simply the needs of a new orthodoxy.

Perhaps the most dangerous words one might hear, at a block-based institution are. "We don't do that on the Block" or "That's not how the Block works." These signal that the work is done, that all questions have been answered, that there is nothing more to be known. These are symptoms of an approach to the Block as a project to be completed, rather than a journey of continual becoming to be embarked upon.

Block Essentials hopes to prompt those involved in the Block to keep questioning what they do, not just for their own sake or the sake of their institutions and students, but because the questions we ask of ourselves as we explore this model have implications beyond the Block. Communities and governments around the globe are tasking higher education institutions to break with the past and to create ways of working that genuinely address the needs of 21st century students.

The Block may not be a perfect fit for every institution but the questions it asks and the challenges it poses to established ways of working are. It is the hope of those who have contributed to *Block Essentials* that this book will contribute meaningfully to the ongoing journey of higher education both within and without block-based institutions.