Getting back to block teaching: developing a university active teaching and learning model

Alasdair Blair[a], Susan Orr[b], James Russell[c]

a Associate PVC Education, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH (ablair@dmu.ac.uk)
b Deputy Vice-Chancellor Education and Equalities, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH
c Deputy Dean, Faculty of Computing Engineering and Media, De Montfort University, The Gateway, Leicester, LE1 9BH

Abstract

In recent years, De Montfort University (DMU) has made strides in enhancing its offer to students with the introduction of a block curriculum model. This was a major change programme for DMU across our campuses and over 80% of our students now study in Block mode. Student survey results point to positive gains across a range of measures. To date the focus of this change programme has been on the curriculum delivery. The university deployed curriculum sprints to revalidate our programmes, thereby ensuring our courses moved over to block mode in a timely way. More recently, the university has turned its attention to Block pedagogy as we recognised that a unified set of core teaching expectations has been lacking, leaving new academic staff reliant on peer support and communities of practice. To address this gap, DMU developed its Active Teaching and Learning Model informed by key academic literature. This model identifies seven principles of good teaching practice: building community and belonging, encouraging engagement and attendance, ensuring relevant and experiential learning, delivering prompt and useful feedback, offering diverse learning approaches, maintaining high expectations, and respecting diversity. The model serves as a practical framework to embed active teaching and learning to maximise the benefits of block curriculum.

Keywords: Active Learning, Pedagogy, Enquiry Based Learning, Teaching Excellence, Student Engagement

Published by The International Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching Association: www.ibilta.org

URL https://ibilta.vu.edu.au

Introduction

It is argued that block curriculum is an approach to course design that supports the needs of the contemporary student in higher education. Research highlights that block curriculum provides students and staff with a better academic timetable by enabling students to focus on one module at a time (Loton et al., 2022). This has been reflected in the arguments put forward by higher education institutions that have adopted a block curriculum, with the underlying aim of providing a better learning environment for students to succeed. This focus on the block curriculum as a means of enabling students is reflected in Weldon's (2024) comment that "institutions pivot toward block because they want to do better." A common theme for many of the higher education institutions which have adopted a block model is a desire to accept and respond to the needs of students who have complex lives. Many students are juggling caring responsibilities, as well as part-time employment on top of long commutes to get to university.

For some universities the decision to adopt a block curriculum was in response to a particular challenge such as a decline in student satisfaction and the need to provide better support for student transition and attainment. This was certainly true of the reasons why Victoria University, Southern Cross University and De Montfort University (DMU) all adopted a block curriculum (Tangalakis et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024; Goode and Blair, 2024). Some institutions, such as Victoria and Southern Cross, have stressed the importance of their own particular 'block model', with this tending to be presented in the context of curriculum delivery through a specific number of weeks. At Victoria University the majority of students study one subject at a time over four weeks, with online courses being delivered over seven weeks and some postgraduate courses over eight weeks. Southern Cross University has structured its curriculum so it is delivered over six-week blocks, with teaching blocks being separated by a two-week break. At DMU the majority of students study in a seven-week block, with students having a week break between the first and second block and the second and third block. In effect, there is no one single block structure, with each university seeking to craft an approach that best suits their needs. Indeed, such focus on the model of delivery as being a mark of distinction has even led to Victoria University to trademark its approach.

At DMU, our shift to a block curriculum was influenced by a need to improve student satisfaction and also took into consideration the need to resolve inconsistencies in our academic calendar, with undergraduate students on a three-term structure and postgraduate students on a three-semester structure. Our academic structure had evolved over a number of decades, during which time student numbers had also expanded, which led to an ever more complex structure at programme and module level which was inefficient to deliver, inflexible for students and also structurally challenging from a timetabling perspective. This included a vast number of possible module combinations that students could take, while there was also a range of module credit sizes being used across the university which included 3,5,6,10,15,20,45, 60 and 90. This led to concerns from both students and staff about the structure of academic timetables, where there were often cases of students having just one class on a particular day or significant gaps between classes. This created challenges in terms of student identity and also raised concerns about ways in which the student experience suffered. Our theory of change in addressing this challenge was that by changing our academic structure, we would establish a student-centred, robust and future-proofed curriculum that would be best placed to support our students teaching and learning by delivering a high-quality experience that would be reflected in improved

student outcomes and levels of satisfaction. We created a combined undergraduate and postgraduate academic calendar, where the vast majority of students study four blocks that are of a seven-week length. Our blocks are typically comprised of a 30-credit module where teaching takes place in weeks one to six, with the final week being devoted to assessment. There is also an enhancement week break between each block, which provides time for students to take additional activities that enhance their studies.

A common theme across a number of studies on the block curriculum is that it provides a student learning experience which enables students to flourish (Allman, 2024; Buck & Tyrrell, 2022; McCluskey et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2024a; Turner et al., 2021). Arguments in favour of a block approach point to the way in which students are better able to gain mastery of the subject matter through studying one module at a time (England et al., 2024). A number of studies have pointed to the benefits of block teaching for assessment and feedback (Buck et al., 2023; Goode et al, 2023).

For some scholars, block teaching is viewed as providing an intensive student learning experience, with this also being reflected in the title of this journal (Harvey et al., 2017; Allman, 2024). Others, such as Goode and Roche, stress that a block approach should be viewed as being an 'immersive' learning experience (Goode et al, 2023; Roche et al., 2024a and 2024b). And whilst a dictionary adjective definition of 'intensive' speaks of the concentration on a single subject in a short time as well as being thorough or vigorous, which is in keeping with a focus on studying one module at a time, it is also the case that intensive may equally be viewed as being a more dramatic or even extreme form of teaching, which is not in keeping with block teaching and therefore this is not a term used at DMU to describe our block offer to students.

These definitions matter in relation to how we define and think about a block curriculum. This is because the definition of a subject discipline, or the way that a subject is taught in terms of the design of the curriculum, helps to frame the teaching and learning environment as well as providing arguments from which other scholars can debate. This is, however, an area of discussion which has been largely papered over in terms of the emerging literature on block pedagogy. One of the reasons for this is that block scholars tend to engage with terms such as 'intensive' and 'immersive' block teaching in a more transactional way, whereby they are used as a framing to support case studies that focus on a specific teaching and learning intervention. Whilst recent examples in this journal include Kappes' (2024) study on the use of immersive learning experiences on two natural environment teaching courses and Huber's (2024) research on emotional intelligence, there is of course a wider body of literature that relates to the use of immersive learning in augmented and virtual reality education (see Miller et al., 2021; Lin & Wang, 2022).

In contrast to this focus on the block curriculum, far less attention has been attached to detailing the way in which block teaching can be viewed from the perspective of a pedagogic model. Leading universities in relation to the block curriculum such as Southern Cross and Victoria have, of course, identified the parameters of what a block curriculum should be and have also identified core pedagogic practices, such as the importance of group presentations and hands-on activities. But at the time of writing less discussion has been given to extending the block curriculum or model into a pedagogic framework that sets out in more detail what the expectations are in relation to the teaching and learning approaches that students will

experience within their block curriculum. On the one hand this is not overly surprising given that in the construction of a block curriculum (as with any curriculum) it can often be the case that more attention is attached to setting out what are core foundations such as the nature of the timetable and the content of the programme. Yet on the other hand, it is also the case that this is somewhat surprising given the extensive literature that exists on effective teaching practice, which includes established texts such as the likes of Ramsden (2003), Biggs and Tang (2011), Muijs and Reynolds (2018) and Weller (2019).

It is therefore evident that far less attention has been attached to discussing the way in which a block curriculum can be viewed through a particular teaching lens that enables academic staff to frame their teaching through pedagogic practice as opposed to merely the framework of a block curriculum calendar. One of the reasons for this is that the decisions taken by universities to adopt a block curriculum were often because of the need to improve the student experience, and given the significant nature of changing the curriculum to one where students only focus on one class at a time it was inevitably the case that such decisions were often strongly aligned to the aspirations of the university's leadership team. A consequence of this is that the strategic imperative of delivering curriculum change within a defined time period was often of greater significance than pedagogic debates regarding the nature of the teaching environment, even though the former was designed to improve the latter.

One of the underlying arguments in favour of block is that it enables more innovative and interactive teaching practices. Whilst for Victoria University this has also involved the redesign of teaching space with a move away from lectures, studies have also emphasised the benefits that a block approach brings in large teaching classes (Dixon & Makin, 2024). One of the arguments in favour of block teaching is that academic staff should be able to experiment with a wider range of teaching approaches as the level of engagement with students is enhanced over a shorter of period of time. Put another way, students spend more focused or concentrated learning with academic staff on the particular module that they are studying as the content is not stretched out across the year. For Slevin (2021) an important argument is that Block teaching enables academic staff to deploy a wider range of teaching approaches that involve the likes of case-based, enquiry-based and problem-based learning. By engaging students in less of a transmission mode of teaching, it is argued that a Block curriculum should enable them to gain critical skills by utilising teaching approaches that involve the likes of practical exercises and real-life case studies such as simulations.

In considering these points, this article sets out the approach that has been taken at DMU to create an 'Active Teaching and Learning Model' as a means of providing a set of core teaching expectations that represent a 'golden thread' of effective pedagogic practice in terms of how our block curriculum is experienced by students (see principles 1-7). We have deliberately attached emphasis to the importance of an 'active' teaching and learning model as a means of situating our approach as a bespoke form of enquiry-based learning. At DMU we selected the descriptor 'active teaching and learning' to connect DMU's signature pedagogy (Shulman 2005) to research on enquiry-based learning, studio based, problem-based learning and project-based learning. Across each of these approaches is a shared commitment to place students' active engagement and participation at the centre of the educational experience (for a fuller discussion see Aditomo et al., 2013; or Higgs &McCarthy, 2008). Enquiry based and problem-based learning approaches often include the following:

- A real-world authentic project or problem for students to engage with;
- Authentic assessment activities;
- Group work (in some cases but not universally).

The act of enquiry is viewed as central to these student-centred pedagogic approaches. The primary idea is that the teaching approach inculcates curiosity and offers students opportunities to actively engage in their learning (Orr & Shreeve, 2018).

In terms of structure, the article proceeds as follows. First, it provides an overview of existing literature on student learning that is relevant to active learning. Second, it introduces and explains the DMU active teaching and learning model. Third, it presents the way in which we embedded the active teaching and learning model across the university and highlights the challenges that are associated with change implementation in a university setting. Finally, it identifies lessons learned and notes next steps.

Existing work on supporting student learning

There is an extensive body of literature devoted to supporting student learning effectively. Some scholars even go so far as to note some of this work as being best practice, particularly in relation to academic papers which report on systematic literature reviews (e.g. Oroco et al., 2024; Oroco et al., 2022). To consider the existing literature on supporting student learning, a search of the Education Research Complete and ERIC databases undertaken on 16 January 2025 with the search parameters of 'university education' or 'higher education' + 'good' or 'best practice' for peer reviewed academic journals published in English since 1985 lists some 8,454 articles. The majority of these articles have been published in the last 20 years, with only 743 published between 1985-2005. In 2024 alone there were 506 articles published. A search on Google Scholar for articles published since 1985 with the same search parameters (with the exception of being limited to articles published in English) lists 14,400 articles. The addition of 'principles' to the search parameter reduces the Education Research Complete search to 718 articles and the Google search to 10,800 articles, which is somewhat indicative of the ability of Education Search Complete and ERIC to have more fine-tuned search parameters. By contrast, when 'block teaching' or 'block curriculum' is added to the search parameters, only one article is listed in both Education Research Complete (Roche et al., 2024) and Google Scholar (Goode et al., 2023). This points to both a challenge and also an opportunity in relation to our understanding of how so-called 'best' teaching practices can either be applied or are being applied to block teaching in a higher education landscape. A similar search using 'university education' or 'higher education' + 'problem-based learning or pbl' or 'enquiry-based learning' + 'good' or 'best practice' for peer reviewed academic articles published in English on the Education Research Complete and ERIC databases listed some 5,994 articles. Once again, the majority were published since 2005, with only 709 published between 1985-2005. The addition of 'block teaching' or 'block curriculum' did not have the same impact in terms of limiting the search, with some 5,794 articles listed, with this likely to be influenced by the wider search parameters of the likes of problem-based learning and enquiry-based learning.

Of the scholarly publications that have examined best practice and sought to identity key principles for university teaching, Chickering and Gamson's (1987) article on the 'Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education' has provided an important platform

for much of the work that has followed on active learning and student engagement. The seven principles are:

1. Encourage contact between students and Faculty
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students
3. Encourage active learning
4. Give prompt feedback
5. Emphasise time on task
6. Communicate high expectations
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning

The combination of their 1987 article and their subsequent book 'Applying the Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education' (1991) have over subsequent years acted as important reference points in the literature with regard to how student learning can be supported, and our argument is that this work is as relevant today as it was four to five decades ago. This is both reflected in citation metrics, with their 1987 article being cited over 11,000 times and the way that their seven principles are commonly used as important reference points on university teaching webpages to support the enhancement of student learning. Although there are a number of examples of this, the majority are from a North American context such as Indiana University (Siering, 2020) and the University of Florida (2024). Scholars have also sought to apply Chickering and Gamson's seven principles in other contexts, such as in the use of archives in learning and teaching (Legg et al., 2020).

Other notable studies which seek to identify effective teaching practices based on a systematic review of the literature includes Hattie's (2008) review of over 800 articles highlighted that effective teaching practices require a focus on the importance of:

1. Communicating clear learning intentions and criteria for success
2. Using multiple teaching strategies that emphasise student perspectives in learning
3. Seeking feedback regarding the effectiveness of their teaching and providing feedback to students regarding the effectiveness of their learning.

Smith and Baik's (2021) systematic review of best teaching practice stresses, among other points, the importance of providing students with clear structure, collaborative learning, the application and the stimulation of knowledge. More recently, the research undertaken by Goode et al. (2023) on the shift to block teaching at Southern Cross University in Australia has emphasised that active teaching and learning approaches are a vital component of student success. A number of studies have used longitudinal evidence as the basis for identifying learning and teaching approaches which seek to enhance student learning. This includes work by Koljatic and Kuh (2001) and Kilgo, Ezell Sheets and Pascarella (2015). A common theme across all of this literature is the positive impact of clearly defined, and in particular high impact, teaching practices on student success. High impact in this context tends to refer to teaching strategies which draw, among others, on active participation, using multiple teaching approaches, providing different examples, giving effective feedback and adopting questioning approaches.

Introducing the DMU Active Teaching and Learning Model

Whilst there is a clear theme across these examples of identifying core curriculum practices that encourage student engagement and active learning, these studies rarely extend from setting out what scholars consider to be core learning and teaching principles to what this means in terms of good learning and teaching practice. This was an area that we wanted to focus on, because our own journey to block was a curriculum first and pedagogy second model, albeit with all aspects connected. This was reflected in the desire (and need) to reshape our teaching in a way which enabled students to study one subject at a time that involved learning strategies which prioritised active and collaborative assessment exercises and which enabled timely feedback. Although this approach was set out in guidelines that staff used to inform the curriculum and pedagogic changes, this did not extend to the identification of a block pedagogic model. As we progressed into the second year of our block delivery in 2023-24 we had the opportunity to reflect on our initial experience through feedback from students and staff, which in turn informed our approach to developing principles of active learning which we considered were most appropriate to our student body and through which staff could model good practice and share practical examples. Our approach here was to highlight the good active teaching and learning practice that already existed, such as the use of simulations and the fostering of peer learning, and to provide a framework from which staff could identify their practice with and also to aspire to in terms of developing their practice. The feedback that we received and our review of the wider literature led to the development of the seven key principles that comprised our active teaching and learning model, namely:

1. Building community and belonging.
2. Encouraging engagement with learning activities and promoting good attendance.
3. Ensuring learning is relevant, experiential and engaging for all students.
4. Delivering useful feedback in a prompt manner.
5. Offering a mix of learning experiences and approaches suitable for a range of learning styles.
6. Having high expectations of our students, in terms of academic achievement and engagement.
7. Respecting difference of all kinds.

These seven principles provide a framework for the embedding of active teaching and learning at the university by setting out the way in which each of the principles can be translated into practice across academic disciplines, with Academic Schools asked to provide examples of best practice for each of the principles. We recognised the importance of devising a model which underpinned our Empowering University strategy, given that the focus on active learning aligned with our university's strategy to empower its students. We also wanted to ensure that the model would be applicable across our diverse disciplines so the model could be applied in lab, studio, seminar, lecture, workshops contexts from engineering through to business, nursing and fine art (*Tables 1-3*).

Table 1. Principles 1-2

Foundational DMU active learning and teaching principles for effective block teaching at all levels	**How this translates to practice**	**Implications for Block curriculum design/pedagogy and assessment**	**Characteristic of good practice in relation to this principle**
1. Encourages contact between students and staff	Focus on student peer to peer and staff to student community building. Emphasise importance on belonging and inclusion.	Each block should incorporate a brief community building activity at the start, where appropriate. Provide structured classroom activities and assessment tasks that assist with transition, e.g. level 4 and level 7 where we have students joining the university. Provide a mix of assignment where possible, such as shorter and longer assessment tasks and/or a self-reflection task that might include what students would want feedback from their tutor on. Use activity feed and discussion forums in the virtual learning environment (VLE). Staff have biographies on the VLE and an active visibility/presence on campus and VLE so that their presence is felt beyond class contact time.	Ongoing, relevant digital communication via the VLE. Opportunities for students to get to know each other via team building activities (focused on clear learning tasks) - online and on campus. Interactive taught sessions that promote dialogue and exchange between students and staff. Ensure that transmission-based teaching such as lectures is divided into short blocks of input with opportunities for lecturers to check on learning and for students to discuss topics and test their learning. AVOID: Over reliance on lengthy and wordy PowerPoint presentations.
2. Develops reciprocity and cooperation among students.	Promote the value of attendance and the idea of students as a collective learning resource. Offer platforms for engagement in class and on the VLE.	Each block to have an introductions discussion thread where the module lead/tutor sets out who they are, their background (Ph.D./practice) and what they teach. Utilise a discussion thread to encourage students to ask questions, share thoughts on course materials, ask questions about assignments as well as to work together in groups. Encourage activities that promote discussion/engagement outside of the classroom where possible.	Model learning set approaches. Inculcate study buddy/peer mentoring frameworks. Promote ethos of kindness, compassion and care for student community. Use digital fora on VLE to assist students in exchanging ideas. Focus on key knowledge/practice consolidation points in the module. Avoid: exclusionary language/activities and recognise that some students might be excluded from participating in activities, e.g. DMU Global, placements, etc, because of potential commitments.

Our journey to creating the active teaching and learning model initially began with discovery workshops which provided staff and student representatives with an opportunity to reflect on their teaching practice against some core propositions that drew on relevant active learning literature. These workshops included both in-person and online meetings to ensure that our stakeholder engagement was as wide as possible, and as such from the outset our discovery and ideational work was rooted in the spirit of co-creation between staff and students. We considered this approach to be essential in ensuring that there was both buy-in and support from across the university as we were aware that there is a considerable difference between the

establishment of a policy or initiative and its successful enactment. This is particularly true in universities, given the challenges of putting in place strategies that enable successful cooperation among often disparate groups of staff whose own objectives are not always aligned. An important benefit of the initial workshops was that it enabled staff across the university to support the development of the active teaching and learning model, which in turn led to better ownership of the model. In practical terms, this meant that the genesis of our active teaching and learning model had at its heart a respect of the range of disciplinary communities within the university and the traditions and learning and teaching approaches that were specifically aligned to them, whether that be from laboratories to practicals, or workshops to lectures. In this regard, we did not think that it was either sensible or desirable to set out a model that created an identikit approach as this neither reflected our own academic preferences nor our experience of leading successful programmes within a higher education environment. Thus, an important part of our active teaching and learning model is that it sets out principles in the form of a broad structure, but allows academic schools and programmes ownership and agency over how they enact these principles.

We consider these points to be important because a lot of the discussion around the implementation of block teaching and the curriculum changes involved have often ignored the complexity of stakeholder engagement and the delivery of effective and sustainable change in universities. Whilst one reason for this might be that the adoption of block teaching by a number of universities was in response to an external shock, such as a decline in student recruitment and student satisfaction, we would nevertheless argue that to sustain effective pedagogic change it needs to be positioned in an ecological framework that is reflected in a distributed leadership approach (see Jones 2017 and 2023; Scott, 2023).

In setting out this approach, we wanted to establish an educative model that all staff could engage with and which sets out a clear expectation between the university's pedagogic ambitions and its strategic aims around teaching and learning. Our cross-university articulation of our pedagogic model means that we can set out clearly to applicants what they can expect if they apply to study with us. We have worked hard to explain to applicants and external stakeholders what block curriculum is and this more recent work explains the pedagogic model that is an important component of block. The model provides a clear framework which enables all staff to have a clear understanding of the key fundamental expectations around academic course delivery and the student experience. This is important in terms of setting out core objectives as well as identifying strategic goals such as improvement in the university's performance metrics such as the National Student Survey (NSS).

Table 2. Principles 3-4

Foundational DMU active learning and teaching principles for effective block teaching at all levels	**How this translates to practice**	**Implications for Block curriculum design/pedagogy and assessment**	**Characteristic of good practice in relation to this principle**
3. Encourages active/participatory/ experiential learning.	Real world learning. Work based learning. Enquiry Based Learning. Problem based learning.	Reflect on ways that students can actively engage with authentic learning tasks in one to one or group projects. Give students opportunities to engage with research, enterprise and pedagogy approaches. Learning outcomes that include a focus on practical/professional skills as well as knowledge/understanding and key skills. Make use of peer marking/feedback where possible, particularly for formative work, to encourage co-operation and engagement with the marking process. Have discussion threads in the module VLE page that focus on particular topics/practice where students are encouraged to post comments. Guidance and advice on students studying with challenging subject areas, e.g. nursing, or sensitive/emotionally challenging topics. Focus on students being supported (students union, personal tutor), mental health support. Focus on students taking breaks from their studies, e.g. going for a walk, emotional and physical self-care.	Utilise authentic examples and case studies where possible in teaching and assessment. Offer a potential choice of outputs for individual assessments and provide a suitable range of assessments. Incorporation of relevant research and practice into class activities where possible – including examples, problem-based learning, etc. Where possible and appropriate, facilitate student-led learning opportunities. Where appropriate, make use of assessment tasks and classroom activities that encourage negotiation and engagement with other students on a topic. This might include assigning students to a particular task or position. Where appropriate, incorporate short reflective exercises that comprise a part of the assessment task. (This might include students writing about what they found difficult about the assessment task, what they have learned, what they would do differently). Recognise that some students come with lots of prior experience, e.g. mature students on Masters programmes, students working in industry, with a view to sharing relevant experience and understanding difference.
4. Gives prompt and formative feedback.	Student peer feedback. Formative feedback. Commit to firm dates for feedback that don't change.	Ensure feedback adheres to DMU turnaround policy (15 days). Incorporate opportunities for personal development planning into taught sessions and tutorials. Such as encouraging students to re-read their feedback from previous modules to look for common patterns/areas for development. Ensure that feedback provides constructive criticism which can be applied to other assessments/modules. Do not leave feedback till the end of the module.	Provide assessment guidance in advance of the task. Offer whole class feedback sessions that draw out key learning points (so less feedback on individual work and timelier group feedback). Where possible, make use of agreed assessment rubrics and approaches to ensure commonality across feedback templates. This will allow students to build on feedback across blocks. Follow moderation and marking standardisation processes. Support students to reflect on how prior feedback has supported the current assignment through classroom activities.

The challenge of embedding a model of pedagogic change

To support the embedding of the active teaching learning model we adopted a multi-method approach of organising workshops where we could socialise the model with academic staff and at the same time asked heads of academic school to complete a template where they provided practical examples of how the model was being developed in their own subject disciplines. Through this approach we obtained a wide variety of examples that related to each of the seven principles. Taking these in turn, on the principle of community building, examples ranged from using group work to building peer-to-peer support in our nursing provision and project-based panels and studio drop-in sessions for media studies. A common theme across community building was the way in which our virtual learning environment (VLE) was being used as a means of social interaction with our students, whether through the use of emoji's to encourage students to talk about how they are feeling, or the provision of interactive study guides. With regard to developing reciprocity and cooperation among students, a common theme across many of our academic schools was the use of action learning sets and group activity in the classroom, with more applied disciplines also focusing on team work and joint projects.

As is common with active learning principles, we wanted to ensure that our students experienced active, participatory and experiential learning. The examples here included a focus on real world learning, with law staff using mock client interviews, mock negotiations and mock advocacy in courts. This focus on the application of learning in a practical setting was reflected in the emphasis that was attached to live briefs, such as practice-based learning in nursing, collaboration with industry staff in business studies, industrial projects in engineering, and project design work in fashion.

Just as we wanted to ensure that students experienced an active learning environment in class, we also wanted to stress the importance of ensuring prompt and formative feedback. Examples here ranged from the use of quizzes to support in-class discussions in engineering and business studies, whole class feedback sessions in law and social sciences, and the use of rubrics in accountancy. On the matter of the setting of assessment tasks and the use of practical sessions, a common theme that came from all disciplines was the focus that was being applied to problem-based learning and real-life scenarios. Examples here included the likes of industry days, engagement with alumni, and an emphasis on small group teaching. Some of these initiatives also involved staff and students taking risks with their teaching practice. For example, in fine art, our level 5 (second year undergraduate) students were asked to move out of the studio environment and instead to treat the module as a residency where they would work with and for a specific audience, thereby reflecting a typical art world experience.

A key underpinning feature of the active learning model was the emphasis attached to communicating high expectations. One aspect of this was the significance of high student engagement such as through in-class attendance. We considered this to be important in terms of creating a strong sense of belonging and because of the correlation between student attendance and attendance. We also wanted to create learning environments which fostered student collaboration and recognised the positive social, educational and employability benefits that come through students discussing with their peers and tutors. We also wanted to stretch students in their learning, such as through showcasing what high quality student work looked like and to ensure that students were fully aware of additional curriculum activities such as the guest lectures. Finally, we wanted to ensure that we reflected the diverse talents of the student

body and different ways of learning. A key aspect of this was the emphasis that we attached to inclusive assessment design and student-centred approaches. Examples here included the use of coaching approaches by business staff, the promotion of diverse speakers in engineering and specific teaching on neurodiversity in nursing and accountancy and finance.

Discussions around these examples and the further socialisation of the model took place in late September 2024, where we organised 13 workshops that comprised both online and in-person meetings that were attended by over 400 members of academic staff. These meetings provided an important listening exercise, where it was evident that the active teaching and learning model struck a particular chord in relation to the focus on experiential and real-world learning, as reflected in the university's origins as a technical school of art and design. Indeed, it was particularly startling that the vast majority of examples of active learning which we received from staff represented long-established disciplinary practices and therefore an important aspect of the active teaching and learning model was its ability to shine a light on these practices and to establish a common pedagogic framework and language which staff and students could engage with and understand.

But despite these positive points, feedback also highlighted that there was a need to translate the written aspect of the model into a more visual framing and as such we developed a short biteable video to promote dissemination, whilst we created a repository of self-access resources for those staff that could not attend. Staff feedback also indicated areas that we might want to consider further, such as the embedding of the model with classroom peer observation and curriculum reviews.

Table 3. Principles 5-7

Foundational DMU active learning and teaching principles for effective block teaching at all levels	**How this translates to practice**	**Implications for Block curriculum design/pedagogy and assessment**	**Characteristic of good practice in relation to this principle**
5. Ensure a sufficient focus on learning time on assessment tasks, practical sessions and problem-based learning.	Well-designed contact time that promotes student engagement. Formal homework /extension requirements.	Provide clear expectations concerning work that students are expected to complete outside of contact hours Convey to students importance of attendance/engagement.	Provide clear guidance and links to resources, e.g. via activity thread in the VLE. Use of the progress checker in the VLE. Embed educational support resources in the curriculum.
6. Communicates high expectations around engagement and attainment.	Emphasize high expectations of students and staff. Avoid stereotyping students or cohorts as unmotivated or disengaged. Assume that all students are ambitious and want to thrive. Emphasise the value of	Communication that sets out key learning over the week ahead and summaries that has been covered. Avoid stressing complexity of current/future job markets which can create heightened sense of anxiety/worry about the future. Use of guest lectures/webinars. Bring in range of alumni who have used their degree in diverse ways to build their career. Opportunities for students to mentor students at a different level.	Encourage and deploy a growth mindset in tutorials and in feedback. Provide feedforward comments on assignment and in class discussions to illustrate what standards students should be aiming for as they progress in their studies. Show what exceptional looks like, through engagement with educational support resources and wider pedagogy. Ensure that we follow-up with students who have not attended or logged into the VLE.

	attendance and engagement. Ensure that teaching materials engage with the latest research to enrich the learning experience.	Focus on stretch resources/materials, e.g. journal articles/professional practice. Share own research/practice Emphasise professional nature of study. Engage students in assessment co-creation exercises. Engage students in research activities, e.g. internships. Review assessment tasks at programme level so that there is suitable diversity. Ensure visiting lecturers are supported/briefed and the module teaching team is all on board in terms of expectations. Gain feedback from students, e.g. informal, student surveys, and provide feedback to students. Ensure that missed content is covered if class is rescheduled. cancelled.	Ensure we are aware of available data on students' particular circumstances, e.g. disability information, mature student, repeat year, failed a module. Promote seminars/research projects. Ensure students are made aware of curriculum or module design changes made in response to earlier feedback. Demonstrate what the end goal looks like, show Programme Learning Outcomes, Quality Assurance Agency statement etc, which can help students to see the overall achievements possible in a block. Make sure students are aware of relevant policies around their learning experience (marking approaches, grade calculations, plagiarism, etc).
7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning.	Engage with Decolonising DMU resources. Utilise students' expertise, identities and diverse experiences to the table. Effectively deploy inclusive teaching approaches and review teaching elements to ensure compliance.	Where possible, provide a variety of assessment tasks, e.g. written, oral, policy oriented, and a choice of assessment outcomes. Ensure a sufficient variety of classroom, workshop and lecture-based activities across a block, to facilitate diverse forms of learning.	Provide a diversity of reading and preparatory materials. Recognise that students have different learning needs and where possible, incorporate this into curriculum design. Identify and celebrate diversity within curriculum. Provide choice in terms of assessment types, case studies, reading focus etc.

Conclusion

The above discussion has sought to raise a debate about the importance of framing block teaching through a pedagogic lens just as much as through a curriculum model. In reviewing the literature on block teaching, it is apparent that whilst some universities have built a pedagogic design into their approach to block from the start, others have adopted a pedagogic second model. Given the scale and complexity of our own university, we established a block curriculum design first and then subsequently progressed to a pedagogic design model. The significance of our active teaching and learning model is that it marks a commitment to a process of continual reflection and largely mirrors a lot of existing practice within the university. Crucially, however, that practice had not been codified into a model and/or a set of objectives, with instead key objectives such as the provision of timely feedback being covered in other university policies. A question might be asked whether we should or could have adopted the active teaching and learning model at an earlier stage in our shift to a block

curriculum? In other words, whether we should have adopted a pedagogic first model. As already noted, this was not deemed practical at the time and upon reflection, if we had sought to identify a pedagogic model or framework from the start, we think that this would have detracted from the benefits of a co-created model where we could also learn from our experience as we progressed in our transition to block teaching. It was also the case that our shift to a block curriculum represented a whole university change project that had an underlying theory of change in terms of the expected outcomes with regard to improved student experience and student outcomes. Whilst in hindsight some may argue that this could have been further codified into an active teaching and learning model from the outset, we also wanted to learn and reflect from our own experience and recognised that there would be a need for a process of continual reflection.

An important point in this regard is that in our discussions on block teaching, we are often faced with either having to defend or rather to articulate the benefits for this approach. Yet, in contrast, there is generally less discussion about the value of traditional academic teaching calendars that are structured in a manner where multiple courses are concurrently taught and where assessments tend to be held at the end of the academic year. Whilst this may reflect the more recent emphasis on the block model, it is equally the case that in the broader literature there may be a need for advocates of those other models to set out the continuing benefits of these approaches.

Our own journey to block has not been without its challenges and as at the time of writing we are only in the third year of our adoption of a block structure, we will need to continually reflect and make changes to our curriculum as well as adapting our pedagogy as we progress. Yet, the underlying focus on active teaching and learning through a block model will, we consider, continue to progress and this will involve in the future a stronger focus on digitally enhanced learning and teaching as we need to consider the development of future pedagogies that fully embrace the digital revolution that is taking place with Artificial Intelligence (AI). For the moment, however, we hope that this article will spark a debate about pedagogic frameworks in teaching and learning, and in particular block curriculum.

References

Aditomo, A., Goodyear, P., Bliuc, A.M., & Ellis, R.A. (2013). Inquiry-based learning in higher education: principal forms, educational objectives, and disciplinary variations. *Studies in Higher Education*, 38(9): 1239-1258.

Allman Z. (2024). Ensuring student mental wellbeing whilst introducing block mode intensive learning and teaching. *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching*, 2(1), 3-21. https://doi.org/10.15209/jbilt.1304

Biggs, J., & Tang, C. (2011) *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, 4th edition. Maidenhead: McGraw Hill.

Buck, E., & Tyrrell, K. (2022). Block and blend: A mixed method investigation into the impact of a pilot block teaching and blended learning approach upon student outcomes and experience. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 46(8), 1078–1091. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2022.2050686

Buck, E., Vieira Braga, P., & Maria Ortiz Granero, C. (2023). Effective Assessment in a block pedagogy: Understanding the impact of summative assessment type on student achievement. *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching*, 1(1): 6-16. https://doi.org/10.15209/jbilt.1280

Chickering, A. & Gamson, Z. (1987). Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education. *AAHE Bulletin*, March, 2-6.

Chickering, A. & Gamson, Z. (1991) *Applying the seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education: New directions for teaching and learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey

Dixon, L. and Makin, V. (2024). Blocked out: Reflections on the potential of intensive modes of teaching to enhance post-Covid-19 graduate employability in large-scale educational settings. *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, 16(2): 292-302.

England, B., Huber, D.H. & Rochester, R. (2024). Timetabling courses in single-subject intensive block scheduling: Challenges and solutions. *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching*, 2(3): 1-22. https://doi.org/10.15209/jbilt.1349

Goode, E., Roche, T., Wilson, E., & McKenzie, J. W. (2023). Implications of immersive scheduling for student achievement and feedback. *Studies in Higher Education*, 48(7), 1123–1136.

Goode, E. and Blair, A. (2024) Back to Block: Re-imagining student learning in a hyper-connected world through an international academic conference. *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching*, 2(3): 23-34. https://doi.org/10.15209/jbilt.1353

Grohnert T., Gromotka, L., Gast, I., Delnoij, L., Beausaert, S. (2024) Effective master's thesis supervision – A summative framework for research and practice. *Educational Research Review*, 42, 100589.

Harvey, M., Power, M., & Wilson, M. (2017). A review of intensive mode of delivery and science subjects in Australian universities. *Journal of Biological Education*, 51(3), 315–325. https://doi.org/10.1080/00219266.2016.1217912

Healey, M. (2005). Linking Research and Teaching to Benefit Student Learning. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 29(2), 183-201.

Higgs, B. & McCarthy, M. (eds.) (2008). *Emerging Issues II. The Changing Roles and Identities of Teachers and Learners in Higher Education*. Cork: NAIRTL.

Huber, D.H. (2024) Developing Undergraduate Business Students' Emotional Intelligence in a Block Class. *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching* , 2(1), 41-56. https://doi.org/10.15209/jbilt.1306

Jones, S. (2017). Academic leadership. In I.M. Kinchin & N.E. Winstone (eds) *Pedagogic Frailty and Resilience in the university*, Sense, pp.163-178.

Jones, S. (2023). An Ecological View of Distributed Leadership for Higher Education. In. A. Blair, D. Evans, C. Hughes and M. Tight (eds) *International Perspectives on Leadership in Higher Education*, International Perspectives on Higher Education Research Vol. 15. Bingley: Emerald, pp.255-270.

Kappes, C. (2024). Designing and delivering embedded immersive learning practices with the VU Block delivery model. *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching* , 2(3): 35-52. https://doi.org/10.15209/jbilt.1329

Kilgo, C.A., Ezell Sheets, J.K. & Pascarella, E.T. (2015) The link between high-impact practices and student learning: some longitudinal evidence. *Higher Education*, 69: 509-525.

Koljatic, M. & Kuh, G.D. (2001). A Longitudinal Assessment of College Student Engagement in Good Practices in Undergraduate Education. *Higher Education*, 42(3): 351-371.

Legg, K., Ellis, R. E., & Hall, C. (2020). Applying the seven principles of good practice: archives in the 21st century university: Archives and Records: The Journal of the Archives and Records Association. *Archives and Records*, 41(2), 109–125.

Lin, Y. J., & Wang, H-C. (2022). Applying augmented reality in a university English class: Learners' perceptions of creativity and learning motivation. *Innovation in Language Learning and Teaching*, 17(2), 291–305.

Loton, D., Stein, C., Parker, P. & Weaven, M. (2022). Introducing block mode to first-year students: a natural experiment on satisfaction and performance. *Studies in Higher Education*, 47(6), 1097-1120.

McCluskey, T., Smallridge, A., Weldon, J., Loton, D., Samarawickrema, G., & Cleary, K. (2020). Building on the VU Block foundations: Results from the inaugural first year cohort. In E. Heinrich & R. Bourke (Eds.), *Research and Development in Higher Education: Next generation, Higher Education: Challenges, Changes and Opportunities*, 42, 61–72. https://www.herdsa.org.au/publications/conference-proceedings/research-and-development-higher-education-next-generation-6

Miller, M.D., Castillo, G., Medoff, N. & Hardy, A. (2021). Immersive VR for Organic Chemistry: Impacts on Performance and Grades for First-Generation and Continuing-Generation University Students. *Innovative Higher Education*, 36, 565-589.

Muijs, D & Reynolds, D. (2018) *Effective Teaching: Evidence and Practice*, 4th ed, London: Sage.

Oroco, L.E., Giraldo, G.R.J & Change, B. (2022). Best practices in online education during COVID-19: Instructors' perspectives on teaching and learning in higher education. *Psychology in the Schools*, 60(11), 4210-4228.

Orr, S. & Shreeve, S. (2018). *Art and Design Pedagogy in Higher Education: Knowledge, Values and Ambiguity in the Creative Curriculum*. London: Routledge.

Ramsden, P. (2003) *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.

Roche, T., Wilson, E., & Goode, E. (2024a). Immersive learning in a block teaching model: A case study of academic reform through principles, policies and practice. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 21(2). https://doi.org/10.53761/1.21.2.12

Roche, T., Wilson, E., Goode, E., & McKenzie, J. W. (2024b). Supporting the academic success of underrecognised higher education students through an immersive block model. *Higher Education Research & Development*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2024.2424157

Scott, G. (2023). Leadership Versus Management in Higher Education. In. A. Blair, D. Evans, C. Hughes and M. Tight (eds) *International Perspectives on Leadership in Higher Education*, International Perspectives on Higher Education Research Vol. 15. Bingley: Emerald, pp.97-114.

Siering, G. (2020). Applying Chickering's 7 principles to Remote Learning. *Centre for Innovative Teaching & Learning Indiana University Bloomington*, 16 September. Available at: https://blogs.iu.edu/citl/2020/09/16/seven-principles/

Slevin, T. (2021). Block teaching in art and design: Pedagogy and the student experience. *Art, Design & Communication in Higher Education*, 20(2), 163-183.

Smith, C.D. & Baik, C. (2021). High-impact teaching practices in higher education: a best practice review. *Studies in Higher Education*, 46(8), 1696-1713.

Tangalakis, K., Hoang, C. H., Knight, E., Hurley, P., Jackson, J., & Hildebrandt, M. (2024). Differentiation through innovation in the contemporary higher education environment: The case of the 'Victoria University Block Model®.' *Innovations in Education and Teaching International*, 61(6), 1305–1319. https://doi.org/10.1080/14703297.2024.2329192

Turner, R., Webb, O. J., & Cotton, D. R. E. (2021). Introducing immersive scheduling in a UK university: Potential implications for student attainment. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 45(10), 1371–1384. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2021.1873252

University of Florida (2024) *Chickering and Gamson*. https://citt.ufl.edu/resources/the-learning-process/designing-the-learning-experience/chickering-and-gamson/

Weldon, J. (2024). Block essentials: A better way to deliver higher education. *Journal of Block and Intensive Learning and Teaching*, 2(1): 1-2. https://doi.org/10.15209/jbilt.1307

Weller, S. (2019). *Academic practice: Developing as a professional in higher education*. London: Sage.

Wilson, E., Roche, T., Goode, E. & McKenzie, J.W. (2024). Creating the conditions for student success through curriculum reform: the impact of an active learning, immersive block model. *Higher Education*. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01283-1