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Block teaching and the three A's: attendance, attainment and attitudes

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Abstract

This paper examines results from a small study that looked at the relationship between intensive teaching in blocks and its impact on students' attendance and attainment. The research also looked at students' perceptions of block teaching and their engagement with the taught topic, and whether the students felt that block delivery method enabled them to learn more than traditional delivery methods. The results indicate that students prefer to be taught in the block format and that they feel more engaged. Students' attendance when taught in blocks is significantly improved which could contribute to attainment. Ideas which might help inform embedded practice are listed at the end.

Keywords

Block teaching; student transition; attendance; learning outcomes; student engagement

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Introduction

Teaching in Higher Education in the UK, its approaches and outcomes, is under increased scrutiny. In November 2015 the UK Government published a Higher Education consultation document entitled *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* (Department of BIS, 2015), which sets out ideas for a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). The discussion surrounding TEF represents a stark signal to teaching practitioners to constantly refine their methods in order to meet both the wider expectations of Government and students, whose needs continue to evolve from year to year. The idea of 'learning gain' (BIS, 2015: 34) – or the measurement of the distance travelled by a student – underpinning the proposed TEF, represents a significant challenge to the sector.

Meeting expectations, improving engagement, satisfaction, attainment and reducing attrition loom large in the discourse, and modifying one's teaching methods could help address some of the key concerns. One method which has been the focus of many studies is block teaching. It is typified by an intensive or accelerated and time-shortened mode of teaching (Burton and Nesbit 2005; Daniel 2000; Davies 2006; Grant 2001; Scott 1994; Seamon 2004; Wlodkowski 2003). This format can be whole day sessions, half days, week long sessions or sessions which last two to three weeks (Davies, 2006). In this paper, it was applied at LJMU to address poor attendance on a specific Level 4 HE module delivered at the Liverpool Business School in 2013-14; the module was crucial as a means of introducing students to the subject area or, in other words, in easing their transition to higher education.

The aim of this paper is therefore to reflect on some of the experiences of applying block teaching, its efficacy as well as some of the intangible outcomes, such as student attitudes. The paper concludes by offering

reflections that may inform practice and implementation.

Methodology

The table at the end of this section, provides an overview of the methods used in this study, as well as a brief description. Overall, the questionnaire enabled students to support their answers with additional comments focusing, in particular, on their attitudes. In very broad terms, by combining both qualitative and quantitative data, this triangulation further illuminated the findings (Hammersley, 1996).

This study examined a 24-credit module delivered to Level 4 students. It had been taught over a two semester block, with 13 weeks' teaching time in each semester. The module was delivered previously in a traditional format with a one hour lecture, supported by one hour seminars. The intensive delivery was taught over five weeks, with students in attendance for two and a half days a week. This was divided into two days from 10:00 until 16:00 and a morning session from 09:30 to 13:00. The initial qualitative data were collected, via questionnaire, four months after the block teaching had finished to enable students to compare this experience with more traditional modes of delivery. As advised by Daniel (2000) this enables students to reflect more accurately on whether they feel their learning outcomes have been achieved.

Hypothesis/Description	Features of Data collection/analysis
1. Attitudes - Students' evaluation of the delivery of block teaching will be more positive when compared to traditional formats.	A questionnaire administered to students who had completed the module delivered in blocks. The 18 questions explored students' views on this intensive mode of delivery. The questionnaire was delivered part way through semester two. This enabled students to have experienced not only delivery in blocks but also a more traditional format with the remaining Level 4 modules being delivered in a more traditional format. Most of the questions were based on students' perceptions of the delivery mode. The responses were anonymised and carried out online.
2. Attainment - Students taking the module delivered in blocks will have better attainment than modules taught in traditional formats	Students' results from each module were compared to examine if there were any significant comparisons to be made between attainment in intensive teaching and those delivered during the rest of the academic year in a traditional mode. Results from the module for the previous two years, which was delivered in a traditional format, was analysed.
3. Attendance (1) - Students taking the module delivered in blocks will attend better than those taught in traditional formats.	Attendance data was gathered from the block teaching module and following modules in the same academic year. The data comprised institutional, electronically generated data and the author's student attendance data. Further comparison was sought against the specific

	module attendance from the two previous academic years.
4. Attendance (2) - Students having taken the module delivered in blocks will attend better in subsequent modules delivered in a more traditional format	Attendance data were gathered from the block teaching module and following modules in the same academic year. The data comprised institutional, electronically generated data and the author's student attendance data.
5. Students in employment - Students currently employed will prefer block teaching as the certainty of an annual timetable allows greater flexibility for paid employment.	Data was collected from the questionnaire and analysed against those students in employment and those not.

Findings

The following findings present a snapshot of the key themes. In terms of attitudes, the results from this study strongly indicated that Level 4 students prefer to be taught in the block format. The students described their experiences of block teaching as being more enjoyable when compared to the more traditional modes of delivery experienced by the same students later in the same academic year. The students also stated that they felt more engaged and that they learnt more when delivery was in the more intensive format:

“It was the most engaging and interesting module that I feel we have done throughout the year.”

“This module was the one I enjoyed most, it was engaging and interesting.”

“The teaching seemed more focused, I felt more engaged and motivated.”

“[It] felt as though we had more time to go through everything.”

These broad findings support those of Burton and Nesbit (2008), Daniel (2000; 2008), Davies (2006), Grant (2001), Whillier and Lystad, (2013). The focus on active learning employed within the module is coupled with the fact that the students were taught as one group, which enabled strong relationships to be formed amongst the student cohort. Block teaching addressed the fourth of Chickering and Gamson (1987) indicators, namely prompt feedback. The ability of time to be allocated in block teaching assisted in student views to be heard and acted upon more promptly. As evident in this study, block teaching is therefore a format that can provide a more structured learning environment, enabling supporting relationships to be built with significant personal contact with staff, an important focus in enabling successful transition (Briggs et al., 2012: 130). This can further help students to develop a programme specific learner identity and thus transition.

The outcomes of this study, although indicating that attainment was improved cannot be wholly relied upon, owing to many other contextual issues. However it is a pertinent area and worthy of further research. Burton and Nesbit (2008: 2-3.) state that ‘most studies’ relating to block teaching indicate that academic performance is “equivalent, or better” when compared to more traditional teaching.

The study also found that there was better attendance in modules delivered in blocks, when compared with attendance in previous and subsequent years. However, and interestingly, students’ ‘good’ attendance was not subsequently maintained when modules were delivered in non-block format in the same academic year. One student stated, “It was a lot more intense which pushed us to attend every single lesson” and that the format of block teaching made them feel more ‘motivated to attend’.

Finally, there was no significant difference between those in employment compared with those who were not, when it came to whether students preferred block teaching or not. Nevertheless it is in the institution’s interest to think flexibly in terms of supporting students in employment; block teaching could be more impactful, with different cohorts and in different contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has reflected on some of the positive perceptions students had of block teaching and noted its impact on attendance and engagement. There are three key implications for practice, worthy of further reflection:

Relationship building – this study noted that block format facilitates effective relationship building between students and between staff and students. This bodes well for both student and staff and greatly assists in supporting transition, especially those with BTEC qualifications who grapple

harder to forge a higher education academic identity in the initial months of their study.

Fatigue - from the author's personal experience of teaching to students for two consecutive days of seven hours, followed by a further morning session, the impact of staff fatigue cannot be underestimated. It is worth considering that there can be insufficient time for reflection and analysis of the material being taught (Traub, 1997; Wolfe, 1998). Also, a teacher needs to consider potential fatigue from the student perspective and, whilst student fatigue was not a feature in this study, it would be prudent to continually reflect on the 'intensity' of the schedule (e.g. factoring more breaks).

Timetabling Increased centralisation of timetabling in many institutions could result in difficulties in planning block teaching; teaching in blocks requires negotiation between teaching staff, academic managers and timetable managers.

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