CEI White paper

Modes of learning: ACU guardrails for quality pedagogy

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Introduction

Guardrails are best practices in higher education to guide design and implementation of learning. *Guardrails for quality pedagogy* provide guidance on enabling high quality student experiences across different modes of learning. These guardrails are founded on ACU's Vision 2033 and Learning & Teaching Policy.

ACU Principles

ACU principles for teaching and learning are drawn from the Vision 2033 Foundation – Holistic Education, which states:

> *Our curriculum is distinctive, innovative and student-centred, while our environments are safe, supportive, inclusive and technologically enriched. We provide both physical and digital learning environments to increase student choice and engagement.*

ACU offers our students extensive choices in how they study either face to face at one of our eight campuses, online using our Learning Management System (LMS), or in a blended online and face to face format. In this way, ACU offers flexibility for students with diverse backgrounds and needs to accommodate lifestyle and learning preferences.

ACU prioritises three principles to guide pedagogy across all delivery modes**:**

Active learning: Learning happens when individuals build their own knowledge as they actively engage with new information, ideas and experiences. Active learning involves asking questions, active involvement in class activities, problem solving, reflecting on personal experiences and relating new knowledge to what is already known.

Agentic learning: Agentic learning occurs when active learners are empowered to take control of their own learning supported by a conducive learning environment. Developing agency is supported by self-regulated learning where students are regularly engaged in activities to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning.

Alignment of learning: Aligned learning happens when learning outcomes, curricular resources, learning activities and assessments are clearly and constructively aligned. Assessment involves the performance of learning outcomes.

Evidence-based, strategic teaching

Teaching strategies are the approaches that we adopt in our teaching based on our understanding of how students learn - accounting for the specific needs of our student cohort. ACU encourages teaching strategies that foster active learning, agentic development and student achievement of course learning outcomes and Graduate Attributes and Capabilities. Teaching methods refer to how you put your strategies into practice in either face-to-face, blended or online contexts. ACU resources can guide you on various teaching strategies and methods such as Problem-based Learning, Experiential Learning or Universal Design for Learning.

All teaching is evidence-based drawing on scholarship of a discipline. But, teaching is a discipline in itself. Evidence of what works in higher education, and what doesn't work so well, is available at the INSPIRE toolkit to guide evidence-based teaching.

Mode selection

ACU offers face-to-face, online and blended learning modes for our students. Blended learning uses multiple modes of delivery including online and face-to-face teaching and learning. Different modes of learning can be conceptualised as part of a continuum of learning with modes made up of different blends of online and/or face-to-face components.

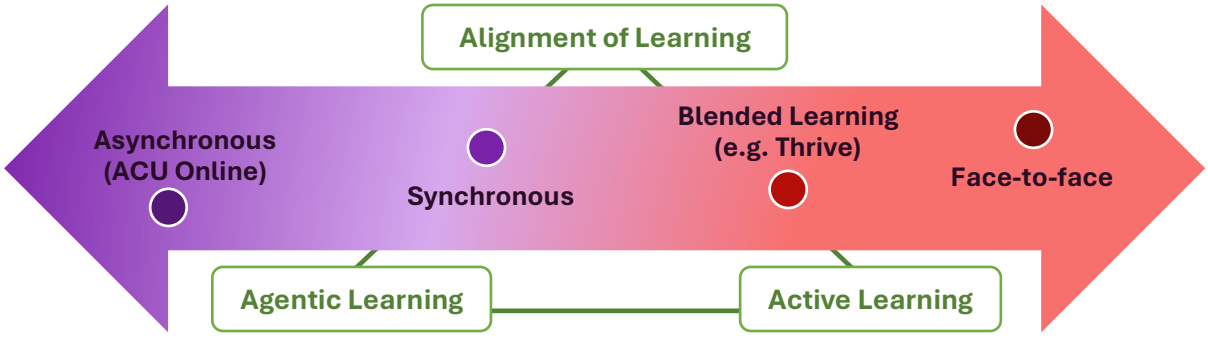

Figure 1: Blended Learning Continuum

Every ACU student learning experience is at least partly online learning as a result of our comprehensive Learning Management System by which all students access their learning resources, their teachers and colleagues, submit their assessments and receive their feedback and grades. For this reason, technological skills in building and managing a unit are valuable for all teachers. Teaching has always involved planning, however, online teaching and learning requires a learning design approach where teachers are both designers of a conducive learning environment and actors in their implementation of a lesson requiring responsive shifts between roles as facilitator, instructor and assessor.

A decision on what mode of delivery is most suitable, and choosing the best blend, needs to take into account numerous factors including:

- unit learning aims and outcomes,
- student characteristics
- discipline requirements
- campus considerations
- coherence across a course .

This decision should also be driven by a clear pedagogical rationale that supports active learning and agentic development for students within a coherent, engaging and aligned curriculum. A decision to offer a unit online within an otherwise face-to-face course, for example, should be made based on what mode would provide the highest quality learning experience for students in the context of their Course, rather than what is most expedient for the Faculty. As there are different guardrails for different modes of delivery on the blended learning continuum, this document provides information to support teachers in each mode. The decision to move an otherwise face to face unit online for any group of students requires appropriate timelines to allow for consultation with CEI and ACU Timetabling.

Good practice for blending learning

Blended learning may occur across a course or also within a discrete unit. It is important to understand the unit you teach when moving a unit into a blended learning model including:

- Where the unit sits in a course as a core or as an elective
- The disciplinary pathways of students who may enrol
- The other learning environments your students may be working in.

Understanding these aspects of how a unit contributes to the wider context of student course progression can assist your development of a coherent learning experience for all your students through design, facilitation, student engagement and assessment. Integration with other (prior and post units) is relevant in terms of a developmental curriculum across a Course, but also relevant to modes of learning. If a face-to-face unit has a LMS page that is not specifically designed for online learning, this may demotivate and exclude online student participants. So, a decision to convert a face-to-face unit to online requires re-design.

The CEI learning and teaching resources provide multiple strategies and ideas for active learning activities for online and/or face-to-face. The following sections provide additional guidance for learning across different modes from on campus to asynchronous online. ACU Thrive provides an example of high-quality blended learning at ACU (p.5).

Good practice for learning on campus

Traditional campus-based teaching is most successful when students are engaged through resources and processes that develop their cognitive, psychomotor, affective and metacognitive domains of learning. A traditional lecture is content-heavy and provides extensive declarative knowledge of theories, concepts, principles and facts. However, this a student-passive, rather than student-active mode of learning and achieves low quality outcomes for developing higher order cognitive skills, affective development and specific skills and competencies (Nilson 2016). For this reason, strategies for breaking up the content in lectures can improve student learning across broad domains.

This may be done by flipped classroom materials that provide pre-class video-based resources so that in class time is student active, engaging them in discussions, experiments, debates, case analyses, polls, quizzes, problem-solving, pair and group work, role plays, simulations. Recorded videos work best when they are under 8 minutes long providing chunked information.

Or, face-to-face lectures may proceed for up to ten minutes and then lead into an activity that engages students in remembering and interpreting the learned content often through engaging with other learners. Such scaffolded approaches to teaching and learning keep students active in various contexts by breaking down tasks and engaging them in learning. This resource provides examples of active face-to-face learning activities (many of which can also be successfully adapted to the online learning environment).

Good practice for online learning

Online learning should provide a well-designed learning ecosystem that responds to the needs and characteristics of a student cohort and may combine synchronous, asynchronous and independent study. Engaging students in regular learning activities, collaborations and discussions as well as seeking student feedback on the learning environment, resources and processes is important to maintaining the quality of the online learning experience. Although

online learning excludes the physical gathering of students and teachers in classrooms, "online and face-to-face teaching share the same values and require the same quality of teacher presence and support when it comes to monitoring learning processes," (Rapanta et al, 2021, p. 721).

Teacher presence is defined as spanning cognitive, social and facilitative aspects:

- a *cognitive* presence, focusing on how teachers take into consideration students' preparedness to participate in the online learning experience,
- a *social* presence, referring to the social communication channels that teachers must open to maintain and possibly enhance the lost spontaneous student-student and student-teacher interaction, and
- a *facilitatory* presence, embracing teachers' facilitatory discourse, direct instruction embodying tools/resources and mentoring activities (Rapanta et al 2017, p.938)

Student 'presence' in online learning is an alternative perspective to the traditional focus on 'attendance' in face-to-face teaching. Student presence is developed in online learning when students are actively engaging with mixed media resources, with each other, with the teacher and routinely reflecting on their own learning successes and challenges guided by a provided or co-designed rubric. In their 2023 scoping review of quality in online learning, Wright et al (p.55) identified the key themes to guide online teaching practice including design, facilitation, student engagement and quality assessment. Opportunity for formative assessment work, feedback and feedforward in online learning motivates students to be present in online classes as they see close relevance to their assessment.

High quality online curriculum development and review is best achieved through a partnership between academic staff and learning experience designers as modelled in the ACU Online approach. Learning experience designers can assist academic staff by planning and developing learning resources for all asynchronous and synchronous online components of learning. There is a level of technical complexity and skill required within the LMS to develop and embed high quality videos, interactives and simulations, quizzing or polling, and recordings, for example, that a LXD can build into learning resources to ensure active and aligned learning.

Asynchronous (online only without scheduled classes)

Asynchronous delivery allows a high degree of flexibility and accessibility for students. This is one of its attractions. However, students need to learn differently when learning asynchronously. Important features of asynchronous online learning for students include; the need for students to see value in, with and from their online peers (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiague, 2017), students are more accountable for their own learning and need support to develop self-regulation skills (Gillet-Swan 2017) and students benefit from multiple modes of communication and methods of feedback (Madden, Jones, & Childers, 2017). New ACU students may be supported to develop their asynchronous online learning capacities by undertaking a 'learning to learn online' induction program.

Important features of asynchronous learning are:

- Clear schedule of learning tasks and assessments
- Selected resources provide maximum accessibility to students
- Clear access to technical, personal and academic support

- High quality video-led resources for learning (ideal length is 6-8 minutes per video),
- A range of activity types including quizzes, polls, discussion forum and prompts, concept maps, group projects, formative peer and self-assessment activities
- Interactives (e.g. H5P) and simulations
- Links to live (current) web-based materials/readings
- Strategies for learner engagement with materials, with the teacher, with each other
- Folio work for students to enter reflective narratives
- UDL strategies to display information in multiple and accessible modes (e.g. transcript on for videos),
- Provide and encourage weekly student consultation sessions with teacher (online).

Synchronous (online only with scheduled 'live' classes)

The strategies above for asynchronous learning also apply to the design of online synchronous learning curricula but with additional preparatory requirements for online class management. In videoconferencing environments, such as Teams or Zoom, creating breakout rooms for planned group work, integrating whiteboard for brainstorming and reporting back, running polls and quizzes, encouraging and responding to student chat commentary, collecting feedback on the learning experience at the end of the lesson help break up a class that is focused on declarative knowledge and broaden the student learning experience developing relationships, building communication skills, The technical requirements for participation as well as classroom protocol need to be considered. The development of content in this mode may still involve videos as preparatory activities as in flipped classroom model.

ACU Thrive: an example of blended learning

ACU Thrive provides an example of a designed blended learning curriculum aiming to support first year university learners develop knowledge, skills and agency through a constructively aligned curriculum offering active learning in online and face to face modes. Thrive is based on a flipped classroom design where the traditional learning environment is reversed, and first-year students are given the opportunity to access their learning content online to prepare for class in advance. This allows students to learn new content at their own pace, in their own time and ensures students can use class time to participate in interactive activities and collaborative discussions with their peers. ACU Thrive has several key features that guide this approach to blended learning:

1. A mix of online and on-campus learning providing flexibility to manage studies and other commitments.

2. Online content delivered in an easy-to-navigate, consistent and engaging way.

3. Scaffolded and mastery-based online learning providing feedback on progress and further support options.

4. Collaborative and interactive in-class activities to ensure students get the most out of their time spent on campus.

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