Active blended learning
Transforming learning and teaching at the University of Northampton

Summary
The University of Northampton wants to create better learning experiences for students and develop graduates with the attributes that employers want – self-directing, digitally fluent, collaborative and with a strong sense of values. So, it is undertaking a long-term, institution-wide process of pedagogic transformation utilising the principles of active blended learning (ABL):

• ABL combines a rich mix of learning in different modes and locations, online and face-to-face, on and off campus, glued together by digital technology

• Students are required to engage in sense-making activities, interacting with learning resources, tutors and each other

• Institutional commitment to this model of good teaching and learning has been demonstrated by the building of a new digitally-rich campus designed around the spaces needed to support collaborative and group work, rather than large-scale lectures

• Students are actively engaged in learning design processes

Led from the most senior level, the university strongly believes that ABL is simply good teaching and which pedagogical approach leads to the best outcomes for students? It brings together:

• An analysis of the attributes Northampton graduates need – to be self-directed changemakers, capable of professional collaboration, with a positive work ethic and awareness of social and personal values

• Learning outcomes aligned to these goals

• An approach to learning and teaching which supports these outcomes and provides students with a fulfilling learning experience

“The University of Northampton is committed to developing knowledgeable graduates, who are socially responsible, digitally proficient and highly employable global citizens – the Changemakers of the future.”

The university has been guided by evidence about what pedagogies support the outcomes its students need to succeed. In addition, the university is determined to challenge and change certain established teaching practices that frequently replicate what staff themselves underwent as students. The Jisc digital capabilities framework for staff is incorporated into the approach.
Active blended learning (ABL)
Whereas “blended learning” has often been used to refer to a simple combination of face-to-face and online learning and teaching, the term has evolved at Northampton and elsewhere to reflect a much richer definition of multi-dimensional learning. It embraces different modes of study, types of engagement, and places of learning. Online learning is part of the blend. Digital technology is the enabler for the blend to become a framework that scaffolds the learning experience. Technology integrates learning across locations, on and off campus, and across learning modes.

The term “active” is also key in the approach. Learners are expected to do things and think about what they do. They interact with each other, with tutors, and with content and resources, engaging in activities which lead them towards making sense and taking ownership of the learning material. Online activities can include tutor-mediated discussions in and outside the classroom, synchronous and asynchronous online collaboration, and techniques to encourage active engagement with resources.

Tutors are expected to remain active, visible and engaged throughout the process. Using “flipped classroom” approaches, face-to-face sessions tend to eschew traditional lectures limited to information delivery. Instead they focus on analysis, discussion and reflection, building on and consolidating learning which has taken place in previous face-to-face sessions, as well as online and through independent study. Face-to-face sessions can be seminars or workshops, or be lab or studio based, or take place off campus in field or workplace visits.

Over the course of their studies this approach supports students in shifting from interdependence towards the independence and self-direction envisaged in Northampton’s framework of graduate attributes. Digital fluency is seen as an integral part of the outcomes for which this signature pedagogy provides a scaffold.

In the ABL approach students are directed towards resources, but what is vital is what they are asked to do with them – simply pointing to content is not sufficient. The central focus of any module of learning is the scaffolding through focused activities that enable students to engage in making sense of the material. In short, content is not king. What learners do with this content to achieve outcomes is. The range of activities possible in ABL is huge.

“The programme is taught through student-centred activities that support the development of subject knowledge and understanding, independent learning and digital fluency. Our face-to-face teaching is facilitated in a practical and collaborative manner, clearly linked to learning activity outside the classroom. Opportunities are provided for students to develop autonomy, Changemaker attributes and employability skills”

Some examples include:

- Online debates
- Setting a reading in an aspect of theory and asking students to consider and share comments online on how this theory applies to their experience. These comments can then become the basis of a follow-up face-to-face discussion
- From a range of resources (reading, audio or video files, animations, etc), students select one or more for a presentation to class (which can be assessed)
Students respond to activities focused on initial tutor input (through video or audio) followed by reflection and critique, in and outside the classroom.

Replacing classroom sessions with field or site visits.

Using student peer assessments as formative activities.

...and many more.

In and by themselves many of these activities are not revolutionary. They are not meant to be. What is key is the context in which they take place, as part of the overall strategic ABL approach, and hence the knowledge and skills that students are enabled to build.

**Student reaction**

Research undertaken by the University in 2017 to evaluate students’ barriers to engagement with ABL shows that students often arrive at university with preconceptions and expectations about learning. They may have ideas about their preferred learning styles and expect university to be dominated by the traditional lecture-seminar approach. The research found that they engage with the approach they find at Northampton where:

- There is a clearly structured learning pathway
- Activities with a well-defined purpose
- Good communication

The evidence is that shortfall in any of these areas can lead some students to disengage. Often, they find the workload required by active blended learning to be more demanding than they expected. Students receive an equal amount of contact time but enhanced through out-of-classroom activities that form an integral part of this active blend. It is possible to over-estimate the competence of students, who have grown up with digital technology as part of their everyday life, when it comes to deploying technology for their learning.

To overcome such issues the university puts a high priority on engagement with students in learning design activities and on building a culture of evidence, trust and respect. Live events with students, undertaken through the Students Union, focused on their learning experience, are complemented by student involvement in course redesign workshops and course validation and review meetings. Students attend not just as observers but as active contributors. Results from the digital student experience tracker are used to influence decision making about courses. Tutors are encouraged to be flexible in adapting their teaching to take student feedback on board within the context of ABL. Great attention has been paid to reassuring students – and parents – that blended learning does not mean any reduction in contact time with tutors.

As a result of this effort and the attention paid to the issues raised by students themselves, the overall reaction from students has been positive. The university received a gold award in the TEF.

**Staff experience and institutional support**

Supporting staff development has been a key part of the development of ABL at Northampton. In a culture that was already student-centred, staff have generally shown willingness to engage in a process of change, which has included a collaborative approach to course redesign and teaching improvement. A programme of staff development activities supports the shift to ABL, and module redesign for ABL is facilitated in a two-day redesign workshop process - Creating Aligned Interactive educational Resource Opportunities (CAiERO). Engagement in staff development leads to HEA (now AdvanceHE) Fellowship. While for some staff the move...
away from traditional models of teaching may have been uncomfortable, the evidence is that most have found the change worthwhile, and over time the ABL approach will shape the approach of new staff as they are recruited.

Making the change has required an institution-wide commitment from the highest level down. The ABL approach covers all faculties and disciplines. The role of the Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT), led by Professor Ale Armellini, is vital, supporting staff and engaging students in the process. A massive sign of the commitment to the institution to the ABL concept has been the design of the new Waterside campus, opening in September 2018. It contains no lecture halls and is a technology-rich space that supports and enables ABL as the standard and accepted approach to teaching and learning across the university.

The ABL approach has also been shaped by interaction with employers, both in diagnosing the desirable attributes of Northampton graduates and in the redesign of individual courses. Employers are often invited to contribute to the CAiERO redesign workshops.

Lessons learned and wider impact
The Northampton approach is that ABL is just good teaching, based on evidence from the literature and their own experience. However, it does require a shift away from models of teaching that are prevalent in the sector. Although it matches the demand often made by students for greater interaction with each other and with staff around learning activities, it can also confound their expectations about what learning, and the university experience involves. It has been a long-term project of strategic change to which commitment at the highest level of management has been essential. Much effort has been dedicated to engaging both staff and students in understanding the basis of ABL and in making the change.

The approach has attracted considerable interest across the sector with over a dozen keynote presentations given so far at conferences in the UK and overseas. As ABL represents the principles of good teaching, it can be applied to other institutions - although to be successful, its application needs to be at the institutional scale, which requires more than a few well-intentioned academics. Buy-in at the most senior level is required. With high quality teaching being of increasing importance in all universities, including the most research-intensive, the ABL approach can be adapted and adopted elsewhere.

Find out more
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“ABL is our new normal. ABL is not something we do in addition to our regular teaching duties: it is our standard approach to learning and teaching.”

Education consultancy Sero HE was commissioned by Jisc to interview Professor Alejandro Armellini, dean of learning and teaching about developments in learning and teaching in a digital age at the University of Northampton. The studies focus in particular on the impact of such developments on the student experience.