

Evaluation of the Online Learning Model, Phase 1: 201730 and 201760

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Online Learning Model (OLM) is being increasingly implemented in a more holistic manner across courses. Version 2.0 of the OLM contains seven elements which are interdependent and described in detail in this report. These elements are:

- Learning Communities
- Interaction Between Students
- Teacher Presence
- Interaction with the Professions
- Flexible and Adaptive learning
- Interactive Resources
- eAssessment

Further information about the OLM and specific strategies for consideration to improve student engagement by focusing on the various elements are available on the CSU Learning Exchange (<https://uimagine.edu.au/csulx/>) showcasing examples of subjects which have applied elements of the OLM and approaches used for implementation.

In 2016, session 90, and 2017, sessions 30, 45, and 60, 116 online subjects incorporated elements of the OLM in eight courses. The most commonly implemented OLM strategies focused on *building and maintaining teacher presence* through improved landing pages, restructure of discussion boards, providing additional Adobe Connect meetings; improving content delivery through *improved subject and module organisation*, incorporating adaptive release, MCQs, welcome recordings, and faculty templates as examples, in addition to revised assessment criteria and design in some subjects; *improving lecture and tutorial support* materials by using CSU Replay, podcasts of lectures, and uploading presentations to SlideShare for example; *improved communication, collaboration and reflection* through the use of Adobe Connect, peerwise and Google forms.

Data collection

All students and staff in the 116 subjects were invited to participate in the evaluation of the OLM conducted by electronic survey and individual interviews. There were 1270 student responses to the survey in 2017 (13% response rate), and 19 individual student interviews, as well as 34 academic staff (40% response rate) and 12 education support staff¹ responses to the staff survey.

Respondents

Student respondents were mostly female (80%), aged 21-40 (64%) with a mean age of 34 years. The mean age of respondents is slightly higher than the proportion of online students at CSU on 2017 (25-30 more commonly), and although there is a higher proportion of female respondents than the online student population (61%), this does reflect the nature of the courses which implemented the OLM

¹ 'Support staff' includes Educational Designers, Education Support Coordinators, and Media Technologists

(e.g. nursing, social work, psychology). Most student respondents were completing two subjects concurrently (62%) and were in the early stages of their course. More detailed information about the respondents and other demographics is included in Section 3.1 (students) and 3.2 (staff).

Key findings

An overview is provided here of the key findings in relation to the OLM evaluation. The full report provides graphical displays and more detailed information in relation to each of the key themes reported here.

Student learning preferences and experiences of learning and teaching

Student **study preferences** were examined to investigate a variety of online learning options (see Figure 3.3.1 in Section 3.3.1), with a need to have all online workshops and lectures recorded dominating the results at 98%, followed by wanting repeat online workshops to be offered (71%) and flexible commencement dates (59%).

Student **perceptions of the OLM** are positive on the whole, and when the importance of various elements was mapped against actual experience of the elements (see Figure 3.3.3 in Section 3.3.3), the following trends were seen:

- Over 80% of students agree that each element is important to their learning
- Teacher Presence is rated as being the most important (97%), followed by Interactive Resources (96%), Flexible and Adaptive Learning (96%), and e-Assessment (94%)
- Regression analyses showed that 71% of the variance in student satisfaction with overall subject quality is explained by their perceived inclusion of the seven elements. Teacher Presence and Interactive Resources were the two elements which correlated most strongly with student satisfaction ($r = 0.798$ and 0.760 , $p < .001$ respectively)
- Students had mostly experienced Interaction between Students (83%), Interactive Resources (78%) and Teacher Presence (78%)
- There was a significant gap between student's perceptions of the importance of Interaction with the Professions (88%) and their experience of this element (50%)
- Overall, there is some alignment between students perceptions of importance and their actual experience of an element, but there is scope for greater improvement here and students preference for the Interaction with the Professions element are not being met

Interview responses and open ended comments on the survey showed that Teacher Presence was the most critical aspect of the online learning experience for most students. This also aligns with the linear regression analysis. Teacher Presence was valued for making connections, creating a sense of belonging to the university, communicating experience and knowledge, and helping to inspire students. This was achieved through availability and accessibility of teaching staff via regular emails, online meetings using Adobe Connect, phone calls, responsiveness when needed, and through residential schools. In the open-ended survey responses, the helpfulness and support of teachers was the most frequently coded category in this area. More detailed information in relation to interview responses about each of the elements can be found in the full report Section 3.3.3 for interview data, and Section 3.3.9 for open-ended survey responses.

Using national measures of **teaching quality**:

- Student and staff survey scores were positive (greater than 70% agreement) for most indicators with the exception of 'commenting on student work in ways that help student learning' for students (63%)

- Students in OLM subjects perceived a higher degree of teacher quality than all online students at CSU and also when compared with national results (see Figure 3.3.7b, Section 3.3.7).

Assessment was the main **area of concern** for students, with lack of clarity, weighting of exams, and poor feedback cited as the most lamented features in the open-ended survey responses.

Student comments relating to the **design of learning activities** or assessment tasks were predominantly positive with respect to the relevance, authenticity, and usefulness of tasks and assessment items. Students especially commented on having tasks which were interesting and which helped their learning and understanding. Regular quizzes, podcasts, feedback, and clarity of tasks were regularly commented on. The quotes provided in the full report (see Section 3.3.8 for examples) show how good subject design, with consideration given to appropriate assessment schedules, relevance, and support, can positively impact student engagement and learning.

Student Insights:

- Online students were strategic in their engagement with content and with others online and were most likely to interact with others when there was a set purpose
- Students crave interaction with the lecturer and are very receptive to any strategies which help to facilitate this
- There was a strong demand for high quality recorded online lectures (98% students wanted this)
- The high Teacher Presence in OLM subjects compared with other online subjects is associated with greater levels of satisfaction with teacher quality
- Relevant, authentic assessment tasks, alongside interactive quizzes help to engage learners further in the subject

Staff perceptions of the OLM and experiences with implementation

Although less than half of the academic staff survey respondents felt familiar with the OLM as a whole, 76% agreed that they felt clear about the intention of the OLM. Although there were moderate levels of familiarity (>50%) with the elements of Teacher Presence, Interaction Between Students, and Interactive Resources (see Figure 3.3.4, Section 3.3.4). Less than half of all staff respondents felt familiar with the remaining elements. Levels of confidence to implement each element were also low – less than 50% for all elements with the exception of Teacher Presence. Teaching staff felt least confident to implement e-Assessment, and support staff felt least confident to implement the Interaction with the Professions element. There is more work to be done in this area for staff development, however time and motivation is a major limiting factor here. As reported by staff respondents, the majority were externally motivated to participate in the OLM implementation as their subject was part of a review or they were directed to by their school leadership. In contrast, staff who were more internally motivated found that the OLM implementation provided an opportunity to improve their learning and teaching practices and they reported wanting to make a positive change in their subject to improve student learning.

Staff held similar perceptions to students in relation to the inclusion of the elements within subjects, with 80% agreeing that the Teacher Presence and Interaction Between Students were included, and 50% agreeing that the Interaction with the Professions element was included. However, there was some divergence of opinion with regard to how important staff perceived the OLM elements to be compared to students and how staff thought students might perceive the importance of elements (see Figure 3.3.5, Section 3.3.5). For example, students rated the importance of Learning

Communities, Interaction with the Professions, and e-Assessment much higher than staff thought these elements would be of importance to students. Overall, staff underestimated the importance of the elements to student learning, and underestimated students' perception of the importance of elements in all facets of the OLM excepting Teacher Presence.

Phase 1 has hit the mark with Teacher Presence – with high levels of agreement that each element was included, and high levels of importance attached to this by both students and staff. Phase 1 has not quite matched expectations however with regard to the staff perception of the extent to which elements were included and student perceptions of the importance of those elements.

Of concern is the number of staff who feel that their workloads were “insufficient to do the job properly” and that technical problems with interactive resources hampered the implementation of some OLM elements. There were also reports of dissatisfaction that the OLM implementation was mandated and a lack of consultation about how the OLM would be enacted within subjects. Open-ended survey responses suggest that although staff are clear the purpose is to improve student engagement, some wanted more evidence about how the OLM will do this or why this is important to student learning outcomes.

The most challenging aspects of implementing the OLM were related to the lack of time and lack of availability of educational designers at certain time points. From the support team perspective, only 36% of support staff agreed that the time available to support the academic's implementation of the OLM was sufficient. The issues experienced by the teaching staff may have therefore been confounded by education support staff lack of time and competing demands.

Staff Insights:

- Teaching staff are confident and familiar with the Teacher Presence and Interaction Between Students elements of the OLM
- Teaching staff are on average, not familiar or confident to implement the other elements of the OLM
- Time and motivation are the main limiters for staff development surrounding the OLM
- Knowing how important students perceive the OLM elements to be to their learning may help to facilitate staff engagement with the OLM
- Clearer linkages need to be made between the OLM and impact on student learning outcomes
- More evidence of the link between the OLM and student engagement and success is needed– this may also facilitate staff engagement
- Greater time needs to be allocated by educational designers and academic staff in designing and developing aspects of the OLM. Longer lead times before implementation are also needed

Perceptions of learning resources and available support

Students and staff were asked about their perceptions of online learning materials, computing/IT resources, and assigned books, notes and resources. Over 80% of students and staff agreed that online learning materials were excellent or good, and over 80% of staff and 70% of students agreed that the assigned books and resources were also excellent or good. Students were more likely than staff to have positive views towards computing/IT resources however (70% vs 60%).

Open-ended survey responses from students provided greater clarity and more useful information here. Although students were impressed with the variety and usefulness of online learning materials,

the IT resources sometimes let them down when recordings are of poor quality or some specific software doesn't work as it should. Suggestions for improvement included having more online books made available, having more prompt responses to the online forum by the lecturer, updating the CSU Replay lectures to be of higher quality, and ability to access lectures on iPhones.

Students valued the Interactive Resources, the interactive classroom sessions with polling, and use of mini-tests to gauge performance and understanding. The assigned books, notes, and readings were also positively received as being relevant, applicable to the subject, and accessible in most cases, especially when provided in a PDF format.

Areas identified for improvement primarily concerned the need for greater use of online learning tools and resources and a need to improve the quality of recorded lectures – sound in particular was an issue, as was the recordings being stopped before the lecture had ended. Students also requested podcasts of lectures along with more quizzes.

For staff, aspects of the OLM implementation which were most valuable were the interactions with the Educational Designers, and the professional development of skills associated with Adobe Connect, interactive resources, and improving the look and feel of the Interact site. Education support staff held similar sentiments about the most valuable aspects of implementing the OLM, with connections with academic and QLT staff and the professional development opportunities being most frequently mentioned.

Insights about resource use:

- Teaching staff found the interactions with support staff and QLT leads to be beneficial and appreciated the professional development opportunities the OLM afforded. Interaction is just as important for staff as it is for students in this respect
- The quality and availability of recorded lectures is the main resource needing improvement
- The majority of staff and students are satisfied with the quality of online resources

Technology and tools

The majority of student respondents agreed that the available technologies supported their learning (77%). Students valued having tools to support interaction between themselves and their lecturer, and also highlighted the benefits of online lectures and online meetings. Suggestions were also made however and faults were recognised with some of the tools, poor quality of recorded lectures, inability to access resources or subject sites on iPhone, and lack of ability to turn notifications on in the Discussion Board.

Technology Insights:

- Technologies for learning seem to be sufficient but could be improved with greater access to online tools on mobile devices and improved recording quality of lectures

Impact on student engagement

Student engagement has various definitions and is known to associate with retention. For the purposes of the OLM, we used the learner engagement items from the national student experience survey as our measure of student engagement and we asked the same questions of students and also asked staff to comment on the engagement of students using these items. They included the

frequency (e.g. sometimes, often, very often) with which students Participated in discussions, Worked with other students, Interacted with other students outside of study, and Interacted with students different to you.

Although student respondents self-rated as Very often/Often from 25-40% on all of these items, this was greater than the percentage of all CSU Online students which ranged from 12-30%. In contrast, teaching staff perceived that students were engaged as indicated by these measures from 30%-63% (see Figure 3.3.9b, Section 3.3.9).

The utility of these measures of engagement are somewhat questionable however. Online students may have no idea if the students they are interacting with are 'very different' to them and it is not practical or in some cases even feasible for students to interact with other students outside of study. Interview data in relation to levels of engagement within the class and with peers suggest that the Discussion Forums on subject and/or course Facebook pages seem to be the primary way in which students interact outside of study or with specific regard to the subject. Perhaps a more appropriate question for our population might be to what extent do you interact with peers using social media channels, email or telephone? This strategy has been adopted in the forthcoming evaluation of the Transform Online Learning pilots.

A second measure of engagement, also utilising the national Student Experience Survey (StES), concerns engagement with key stakeholders such as other students, subject content, teaching staff, the university, and the professional and wider community. This scale is perhaps of greater relevance and is more appropriate to the aims of the OLM. The results show that students felt most engaged with subject content, followed by teaching staff and the university. Engagement with peers was low, as was engagement with the professional and wider community. These results (see Figure 3.3.10, Section 3.3.10) align well with the student experience of OLM elements in previously mentioned Figures which show that students did not frequently interact with other students, the positive responses to teaching quality and the results which showed that students had little experience of engaging with people and practices in the professional workplace.

Teaching staff are satisfied with the quality of student engagement, especially the engagement of students with subject content, and over 70% agreed that the OLM had improved the student learning experience (see Figure 3.4.2, Section 3.4.2). Some caveat's to this data were provided in the form of staff commentary and provide further understanding here. For example, in some subjects there were concurrent content changes alongside OLM implementation, and staff had also not seen the results of the student subject evaluations at the time they were interviewed. There were also many students who failed to take advantage of some of the new tools being trialled to enhance learning.

Interactive resources, authentic practice and site aesthetics were found to be successful strategies in improving student engagement. Student attitudes, lack of time to trial and test new technologies and lack of continuity in staff support were cited as the main barriers.

Insights about impact:

- The alignment between standardised measures of engagement, such as the national SES, and the findings reported here on student experiences with the OLM suggests that student experiences with the OLM may potentially act as a proxy measure of engagement and it might be expected that the successful implementation of the OLM could lead to higher levels of engagement in this way.
- National measures of student engagement are not tailored to the online learning environment and caution is needed when interpreting the responses to some questions from the national instrument
- It is too early to draw any firm conclusions after just one iteration of the OLM in each subject. As more staff participate in the OLM implementation, professional development opportunities expand, and motivation and workload parameters more closely align with the required demand we will have more evidence upon which to inform future iterations of the model and to evaluate student receptivity to this.
- The consensus from staff in the survey and in focus groups was that more planning time and support is needed to do this well and to evaluate impact more meaningfully

Moving forward

Although 80% of teaching staff felt that subject resources and teaching approaches in the OLM were sustainable, and over 70% felt well supported by educational designers and QLT leads, just over 10% agreed that there was sufficient planning time to implement the OLM changes.

Being supported to implement the OLM elements through regular contact with an educational designer, and being shown the possible tools and strategies was identified as crucial to the element being successfully implemented, despite the lack of time allocated. In addition, teaching staff commented that direct support at the time of implementation was required, especially when Adobe Connect is being utilised.

From the support staff perspective, greater engagement between the OLM staff and academics is needed alongside early and regular consultation with teaching staff surrounding resource development and training in the relevant technology being used.

Challenges to implementation reported included the lack of planning time, the level of trust within academic teams and between academics and the support staff, and the concurrent introduction of the Transform Online project. There was some confusion expressed about the TOL project and the pedagogy behind this, with some staff reluctant to engage further with the OLM because of the perception that TOL and the OLM are somehow in competition.

Insights for future implementation:

- Greater communication is needed about OLM strategies and how they benefit student learning and engagement
- Greater planning time is needed for OLM implementation in subjects, especially if new technologies are being trialled
- Dedicated workloads are needed to implement the OLM, including the provision of meeting time between educational designers and academics
- Greater transparency is needed in relation the TOL project and how it builds on the OLM and will achieve further student engagement
- Teaching staff need to be consulted early and regularly with regard to any pedagogical strategy to improve student learning and need reassurance that the recommended strategies are based on evidence, will be supported, and will have a positive impact on student learning

Overall

Students had an overall positive experience with their subjects, mainly attributable to strong teacher presence which was engaging, helpful and supportive. Students responded favourably to Interactive Resources and were engaged with the subject content to a moderately high level. Improved quality of lecture recordings, greater feedback and responsiveness from some staff, and a need for more direct interaction with the lecturer, through online meetings for example, were identified needs from the student perspective.

Staff responded well to the Teacher Presence element and had a moderate level of understanding about the intentions of the OLM project but more work is needed to upskill staff and improve confidence and understanding in relation to the six other elements of the OLM. Greater communication and engagement with staff about the purpose of the OLM, evidence and rationale for implementation is also required.

Staff made specific suggestions to improve the OLM implementation in relation to greater planning time needed, the provision of ongoing support at the time of implementation and greater clarity about the impact of the TOL project. Subject changes made to date seem to be sustainable but ongoing evaluation is needed to gain a greater understanding of the impact of the OLM on both students and staff who have participated in OLM elements through multiple iterations.

Recommendations

Areas of strength

Teacher Presence is being done very well and producing favourable student comments. Exemplars of this need to be more widely distributed with positive feedback to staff who are doing this well.

Educational designers have established strong relationships with teaching staff which need to be fostered, supported with appropriate time allocations, and continued.

Students are responding well to Interactive Resources. Exemplars of these need to be more widely distributed as well. In addition, online learning resources and tools are well received and generally accessible with a student preference for PDFs to be made more available to aid printing.

In summary, the evaluation data suggests that the model is at an appropriate level of refinement to meet staff and student needs and now the focus needs to be on increasing familiarity with the elements and promoting the Learning Exchange where there are examples of the implementation of the OLM.

Areas for improvement

It would be useful to follow up with staff who are implementing the OLM elements a second or even third time to investigate ongoing impact on workload and student engagement and to further investigate from a staff perspective how the OLM could be refined and/or supported.

Student demand for high quality recordings of lectures and online meetings needs to be acknowledged and appropriately resourced.

Interaction with the Professions is an element needing greater attention as students perceive it to be very important to their learning and have not received much experience of it. Staff also reported a lack of confidence in implementing this element and perhaps more time and attention needs to be allocated to developing strategies to overcoming these challenges.

Authentic assessment tasks with timely feedback and greater clarity are perceived as an area of need for students, alongside improved quality of recorded lectures and improved accessibility of learning materials on mobile devices.

Greater consultation with staff alongside appropriate workload allocation and planning time is needed in future iterations.

Implications for TOL moving forward

Clearer communication is needed about how the OLM is informing TOL and early data needs to be released, for example in a workshop format, to staff to indicate how it has been implemented by staff and received by students. TOL champions from within the TOL pilot could be identified to lead a series of discussions around these issues.

Conclusion

This evaluation report presents the results of the first upscale of the OLM into subjects. Further implementation and repeat implementation of OLM elements within subjects is needed to more accurately understand the design challenges, student and staff perceptions of implementation, and solidify implementation protocols and improved support strategies. Nevertheless, the overall experience of the OLM has been a positive one, despite the workload and technology challenges associated with trialling new tools, and the OLM seems to have had a positive impact on Teacher Presence. This is something to build on as staff gain more confidence with understanding the OLM and become more familiar with implementing particular elements.

A third iteration is needed to trial the OLM in subjects with full support capacity, improved planning time, in an environment of trust and collegiality where staff are genuinely motivated to improve the subject using the OLM elements.

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See this link for the [Full Report](#)

Please contact Sarah Hyde shyde@csu.edu.au if you have any comments or questions