

From MBA to MCM: A pedagogical examination of blended residency-online teaching and learning in a graduate professional communications program

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides an overview and assessment of the blended learning pedagogy employed in a unique Canadian combined academic-professional Masters programme. It looks at the perspectives of faculty and students relative to key teaching and learning concerns. The paper analyzes the discussion of faculty at a retreat and a follow-up focus group with students. The analysis of faculty and student reflections is triangulated with a literature review of the relevant pedagogical theory and practice. The pedagogical research focuses on the area of blended residential/online delivery of graduate professional programs in Canada and around the world.

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In 2007, McMaster and Syracuse Universities partnered to create the only communications management degree program offered in Canada, the Master of Communications Management (henceforth MCM). The MCM program combines the academic and professional expertise of three academic units: McMaster University's DeGroote School of Business, McMaster's Department of Communication Studies and Multimedia and Syracuse University's S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. The program offers "professional communicators and communications executives a unique opportunity to earn a postgraduate degree while continuing to earn a living" (McMaster University, 2013).

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In January 2013 the program underwent a self-study to provide a comprehensive picture of the graduate program.¹ An external Institutional Quality Assurance Process (IQAP) Review Team conducted a rigorous assessment of the program and concluded that the program is consistent with the McMaster University's mission and academic plans, and that the MCM program "delivers an innovative-graduate experience that connects research and teaching directly to the needs of the professions and the communities it serves" (MCM IQAP, 2013). The authors of the IQAP review suggested that the MCM program had established the national benchmark for a professional communications masters program.

To further develop the program and maintain its rigorous standards, the MCM instructors gathered at a retreat following the review, in May 2013, to discuss the program and reflect on its successes and challenges. MCM instructors discussed different aspects of the program including: teaching and learning roles, learning outcomes, the residency experience² and online learning. This paper will discuss the current landscape of pedagogical literature on professional programs employing blended on campus residence sessions with off-campus online learning. Based on the retreat and the literature review, follow up focus group research with graduate students was conducted in June (while students were on campus for their Summer 2013 residency week).

The remainder of the paper is organized in terms of the 1) Faculty Retreat and 2) Student Focus Group.

Review of literature

The relevant literature that informed both the theoretical insights and practical improvements applied to programs like the McMaster University MCM are examined in three sub-sections: 1) Teaching and Learning Roles; 2) Learning Outcomes; and, 3) Blended Learning.³

1. The self-study was conducted as part of the program's first-scheduled Ontario Universities IQAP review.

2. "All MCM students attend three six-day on-site residencies per year (mid October, mid February and mid June). Each residency period runs for a period of 6 days from Saturday to Thursday from 8:00am - 5:00pm daily (...) The residencies create a rich learning environment and an opportunity to connect with your online community (allowing students to) **interact** with faculty, staff and peers from a variety of backgrounds and geographies (as well as) **expand** your learning with experiential education activities (and...) **network** during complimentary social events" (McMaster University, 2013)

Teaching and learning roles

Early survey results from the National Education Association show that it can be more demanding to teach online courses than to teach them in traditional lecture mode (National Education Association, 2000). As Boettcher points out, sharing information face-to-face may take 30 seconds, whereas exchanging the same information on an online course may take two to three minutes (Boettcher, 1998; Zhu, Payette & DeZure, 2003). Duckworth (2002) and Zhu et al. (2003), suggest that the right number of students for a course depends on many factors, though the ideal number of students for an online course can range from 10 to 60-plus. Since online courses are more time consuming, increasing enrollment can further reduce the instructor's ability to make a substantial time commitment to higher levels of dialogue with the students.

Research conducted by the SUNY Learning Network has consistently found that quality and quantity of student-student and student-professor interactions are strongly correlated with student and faculty satisfaction (Pelz, 2004). Swan (2002) also collected data from SUNY's Learning Network and found that students' perceptions of satisfaction were determined by: clarity and consistency in course design, feedback from instructors, and active discussion (Swan, 2002). Del Harnish (2001), professor and Assistant Dean for the Faculty of Health Sciences at McMaster University, also found that online discussions increase interactivity between the instructor and the students. He suggests that it is important to consistently try to involve students in the discussions (Harnish, 2001).

Learning outcomes

Zhu et al. suggest in *An Introduction to Teaching Online* that instructors determine the intended learning outcomes for their course before they design course activities, evaluation methods, and online tools (2003). All the course activities should line up with one or more of the intended learning outcomes for the course (Zhu et al., 2003).

3. Given the attempt by the authors to use in a faculty retreat and focus group the pedagogical insights of the various MCM faculty, administrators and students, elements of the literature actually were more fully developed in the midst of the study. Therefore some of the material and discussion we cite in this section come not only from the two primary authors but also from among the MCM participants in the faculty retreat and the students in the focus group.

In a meta-analysis conducted by the U.S Department of Education the authors state, “overall, the available research evidence suggests that promoting self-reflection, self-regulation and self-monitoring leads to more positive learning outcomes” (Means Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2010, 45). Means et al. (2010) also examined the degree to which promoting aspects of learner reflection in a web-based environment improved learning outcomes. These studies found that a tool or feature promoting students to reflect on their learning was effective in improving outcomes.” In essence, promoting self-reflection, self-regulation and self-monitoring all lead to more positive on-line learning outcomes.

Blended learning

In 2010, the U.S. Department of Education commissioned a meta-analysis of pedagogical research on online learning (Means et al., 2010). They reviewed all research studies published between 1996 and 2008 that examined the effectiveness of online learning. Overall, of the 50 cases analyzed⁴, they concluded that those students who took all or part of their courses online (i.e., blended or fully online) had marginally better outcomes than those who took the same course solely through face-to-face instruction. This analysis suggests that a blended or online program, like the MCM, can be successful.

Online learning appears to be an effective option for undergraduate and graduate students in a wide range of academic and professional studies (Mean et al). Similarly, recent meta-analysis of other studies by Shachar and Neumann (2010) demonstrates the overall success of online learning in most post-secondary environments. The researchers compared the differences between the academic performances⁵ of students registered in distance education courses more broadly (not only those that are fully online) to those registered in traditional face-to-face courses. The results revealed that in approximately 70 per cent of cases, students taking online education performed better than students in traditionally instructed courses . The study did not examine the circumstances in which students took online courses (i.e., why students take online courses or whether online courses appeal to students with higher grades). These overlooked variables cast doubt on the assertion that online

4. Of the 50 cases analyzed in the study, 43 were drawn from research with older learners. The search encompassed the research literature of K-12 education but mostly on career technology, medical and higher education, as well as corporate and military training.

5. Academic performance is based on final grade in the course. It does not evaluate other aspects of academic performance.

courses increase student performance because alternatively, online courses may appeal to high performing students.

Paul Creasman in his article *Considerations In Online Design* suggests that online or distance education needs to be underpinned by the same principles of pedagogy that guide successful face-to-face classes, such as collaboration and employment of multiple modalities (Creasman, 2012). Working from the canonical 1987 Chickering and Gamson *Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education*, Creasman also developed seven tips for developing online courses for success in a PSE environment:

1. Instructors should have students work collaboratively and actively.
2. Instructors should have students make connections between concepts.
3. Instructors should make their interaction with students, and their own “social presence”, part of the course.
4. Instructors should balance amount of information available and weekly assignments with the time students have to digest it all.
5. Instructors should make sure that their learning outcomes are appropriate to their technology options.
6. Instructors should plan for up to 12 months to fully implement their course - from initial design to the first day of class.
7. Instructors should prepare their students technologically (Creasman, 2012, p. 3-5).

Findings from the Department of Education study suggest that students who received online instruction that is collaborative or instructor-directed were more successful than those who worked independently (Means et al., 2010). This suggests as per the MCM discussion that building purposeful online principles that support the overall learning outcome, such as collaboration within a context of instructor direction, are crucial for success.

In addition to the principles listed by Creasman, Bill Pelz, a psychology professor at Herkimer County Community College, has developed three principles of effective online pedagogy. The three principles are:

- Let the students do most of the work
- Place a strong emphasis on interactivity
- Establish a presence in the course (both instructor and students) (Pelz, 2004, p.33).

6. The meta-study evaluated 125 studies, which included 20, 800 students. The study used fixed and random sampling methods to determine results.

It should be evident that courses with a significant online component need to be designed differently than face-to-face courses. The literature suggests that taking a face-to-face course and making it available online is unlikely to lead to success (Whitlock, 2001, as cited in Zhu, Payette, & DeZure, 2003). Creasman states, “designing the online course is not a simple matter of putting the material on the web” (Creasman, 2012, p. 1).

Royal Roads University (RRU) in Victoria B.C. has long relied upon on learning management systems to deliver its academic graduate and professional programs (Chao, 2008). Between 2006 and 2007, RRU switched their learning management system to Moodle (Chao, 2008). When searching for a new LMS Chao found that Royal Roads focused on three objectives:

- Improving online teaching and online learning experiences.
- Fostering productivity and efficiency in development and delivery of online courses.
- Help RRU stay at the forefront of distance learning by aligning teaching innovation with learning technology advances (Chao, 2008, p.46-52).

RRU switched to Moodle in 2006 “because the [Moodle] software is based on the constructivist theory of learning and fit[s] RRU’s outcome-based learning models” (Chao, 2008, 47). Royal Roads focused on supporting the learners in an online environment (Chao, 2008). The RRU students now receive technical training during their first residency on campus. The technical trainers give tutorials in the computer lab, give students access to help desk support and provide hands-on practice with Moodle (Chao, 2008). RRU also implemented an email address that is dedicated to students’ requests and feedback about the online system (Chao, 2008). The technical support team makes it a priority to be responsive to faculty and student questions about the LMS (Chao, 2008). RRU also consistently monitors progress and assess success or failure with their online system (Chao, 2008). These strategies have made their online courses accessible for all students and faculty and established them as forerunners in online education. Their strategies for technical support and education provide a model for other programs delivered online.

Mount Saint Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, offers professional degrees in public relations and communications. It offers courses through a variety of technologies, including Moodle, Elluminate Live and chat software (Mount Saint Vincent University, 2013). MSVU gives students access to “Blackboard Collaborate,” a training software, so that students can familiarize themselves with Moodle and Elluminate (Mount Saint Vincent

University, 2013). There is no literature available on their successes or challenges with their online systems.

McCray (2000) suggests that face-to-face teaching is a “significant component of the value added to the course by the professor during class meetings is this role of adding to, culling, filtering and integrating course materials and concepts” (McCray, 2000). In other words, in other such programs the residency, or face-to-face portion of a program has been valuable to instructors in having students achieve learning outcomes. However, some studies reveal less optimistic results about blended learning over only online learning.

Means et al. (2009) also reviewed and summarized experimental and quasi-experimental studies that compared different versions of online learning. The majority of the ten studies that directly compared purely online and blended learning conditions (within a single study) found no significant differences in student learning. Seven studies found no significant difference between the two, two found statistically significant advantages for purely online instruction, and one found an advantage for blended instruction (Means et al, 2009, 38). In a different study, Allen, Seaman and Garrett (2007) examined blended learning based on responses from over 1000 universities and colleges in the U.S. The results show that only 38% of respondents agreed blended courses had more potential than online courses (Allen et al., 2007).

Faculty retreat⁷

The first MCM faculty retreat took place in Hamilton at an off-campus location over one day in May 2013. The retreat involved the four full-time core faculty members of MCM, three part-time Canadian sessional instructors (two associated with DeGroot as full-time faculty, and one a professional communicator from outside the university who has taught numerous times at the MCM), one Syracuse-based faculty member (who joined the focus group through Skype), one potential TA, an educational consultant with the McMaster University Centre for Leadership in Learning (CLL), and the senior undergraduate CSMM researcher (and first author of this paper). The reflections from faculty members and others are discussed below in light of the literature.

7. For a summary of strategies brainstormed by faculty, refer to Appendix 1, “Faculty Retreat Results.”

Teaching and learning roles

MCM instructors at the retreat expressed that they enjoy teaching the mid-career MCM students, at a level beyond that of other categories of students, finding the students engaged and attentive, with a strong desire to succeed. However, instructors saw a challenge in fulfilling their teaching role due to an increase in enrolment from the previous year (from 13 in 2011 to 24 in the 2012 cohort).

Many of the instructors at the MCM retreat expressed a concern that with a higher enrolment they would have less time to spend with each student, with this being a particular concern for the capstone course in which students develop new professional communication research and best practices. As noted in the literature, increasing enrolment can limit the instructor's ability to dialogue with students, particularly with online courses. Therefore, it is important that university programs strive to maintain a high level of interaction between students and instructors, particularly by providing feedback and stimulating meaningful discussions.⁸

Teaching assistants (or TAs) are a recent addition to the MCM program delivery, though it was noted by MCM faculty that they could serve many meaningful roles within the structure of the program. The function of the TA for the MCM program is different than non-professional graduate programs (which rarely employ TAs). The retreat raised such questions as: Apart from assessing students' work and giving timely feedback, what other roles can they play? Should the TAs attend the residency portion of the course? Can they play a mentorship role? With the issue of increased enrolment noted earlier, the retreat concluded that TAs might be able to maintain interaction and engagement with students when instructors are not able to do so.

At the retreat the instructors developed potential strategies for making the role of the MCM teaching assistants more defined⁹:

8. In subsequent years, cohort size has remained stable with 22 in 2013 and 24 in 2014. The student experience appears to have been improved with students indicating high and growing satisfaction rates with the program and with individual courses taught year over year by the same instructors.

9. At the time of print, strategies 1 and 4 have been implemented with good results. The involvement of the Centre for Leadership in Learning will be implemented in 2014-15 and instructors have been asked to provide specific instructional guides for TAs in each of their courses. The results of these strategies will be evaluated and reported upon in a future study.

1. Conduct a workshop with the TAs at the beginning of the semester to outline their roles and responsibilities;
2. Attend the McMaster University Centre for Leadership and Learning TA workshop training or use parts of their training as a resource;
3. Give TAs a specific instructional guide for each course; and,
4. Debrief with TAs at the end of the year and get their feedback.

It is evident that teaching assistants can play a crucial role in the delivery and success of the MCM program. Therefore, it is important to investigate their role further within the framework of a professional graduate program.

Learning outcomes

The MCM instructors agreed at the retreat that it is important to determine the learning outcomes first and then design the course. They also noted that it was important to make the learning outcomes clear on the course syllabus and have the syllabus accessible to all instructors and students. This has occurred to a large extent, but even further coordination about effective articulation and communication to students of learning outcomes is required. This practice corresponds to what Zhu et al. suggest in *An Introduction to Teaching Online* design course activities, evaluation methods, and online tools after they determine the learning outcomes (2003). In addition, the literature also suggests it is important to promote self-reflection, self-regulation and self-monitoring, as it has a positive affect on learning. Therefore, when designing new courses for the MCM program, learning outcomes must continue to be the first step when designing a course and must be accompanied by assessments and activities that promote self-enhancement.

Blended learning

The MCM program is designed to teach students through a blended learning approach. The blended approach combines computer-mediated activities with a face-to-face classroom teaching. The MCM program has a one-week residency every semester (i.e., three times a year) with the remainder of the program delivered through online platforms.

The MCM program currently uses the learning management systems (LMS) Adobe Connect and Avenue to Learn (A2L). At the retreat, some

instructors expressed they found the operation of these online components to be a challenge. The instructors brainstormed and developed strategies for increasing engagement, efficiency and maximizing the technology. For example, one long-time instructor suggested assigning a leader every week to lead and facilitate the discussion. This would place more emphasis on interactivity as well leave most of the work to the students (the full list of strategies brainstormed at the meeting are available in Appendix 3, Strategies to Online Learning).

In addition to offering content online, the MCM program has a one-week residency every semester. Other Masters programs that draw students from across the country only provide online courses and do not offer a blended approach. For example, Mount Saint Vincent's Master of Arts (Communications) and Master of Public Relations are offered primarily online. While some of the elective classes are face-to-face it is possible to complete the program entirely online (Mount Saint Vincent University, 2013). At the retreat the MCM instructors agreed that the residency periods, and the face-to-face teaching and learning style, added greatly to the experience and learning outcomes. Students are highly engaged and attentive during these classroom courses and the instructors feel it is a crucial part of the learning process. Furthermore, previous cohorts have found that residency is crucial to the social and cultural experience of building a strong cohort and team experience that is crucial for professionals.

Focus group with MCM students¹⁰

In order to determine the effectiveness of the MCM's hybrid teaching model, researchers conducted a focus group with seven MCM students during the June 2013 residency. The purpose of the focus group was to collect student feedback about their MCM learning experience and to analyze what they perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of the program, particularly in regards to the hybrid learning model.

The focus group took place over the course of an evening in a setting off the main campus. It was moderated by the a senior undergraduate student trained over two years in research methods, including focus group moderation (the primary author of this paper). The senior undergraduate student was previously unknown to MCM students. She was assisted by another McMaster

10. For a summary of student reaction, refer to Appendix 2, "Focus Group Results."

University-trained undergraduate student in hosting and note-taking.¹¹

Of the seven participating MCM students, two were in their second year of study (the 2011 cohort) and five participants were in their first (2012 cohort); the gender split was three males and four females. The participants were chosen based on their availability, with the only requirement being that they were enrolled in the MCM program. The focus group was conducted without any instructors or staff present in order to provide a neutral environment for the participants.¹²

a. Teaching and learning roles

As the literature suggests with regard to online difficulties with larger enrolment, the focus group results show that the MCM students who were in the 2012 cohort (the cohort with 22 students, as opposed to the 12 in the previous year) faced greater challenges interacting with their peers online. Due to the number of students enrolled in the program, the participants said they found it arduous and overwhelming to read all the forum posts, and thus keep up with the discussions. With a large group, several of the participants said they felt obligated to post on Avenue to Learn and often “post[ed] for the sake of posting” to keep up with their peers and receive participation marks. One participant said, “[Students] in the group feel compelled to write even if they don’t necessarily feel an authentic desire to contribute to the conversation” (Focus group participant, 2012 cohort). On the webinar system used for real-time, synchronous MCM seminars, the participants said that the chat window moved so quickly, due to the number of participants, that they often missed portions of the discussion. The 2011 cohort focus group participants did not have these challenges with the discussions or chats, most likely because their cohort was significantly smaller.

To remedy this issue, one participant suggested having breakout groups. This would entail smaller groups within the cohort that discuss different assigned topics. This participant believed that if the cohort was divided into smaller groups, students may not have felt inundated by the posts and would have contributed more thoughtfully. Participant Five said, “I think an alternative could be, again, breakout groups. You break out into smaller groups to tackle different topics.” The focus group data indicates that as the MCM

11. The authors wish to thank Ms. Cassandra D’Ambrosio for her work in this role.

12. Ethical considerations to avoid undue risk and provide complete confidentiality and anonymity were deployed and monitored under the extension of a protocol developed by Dr. Philip Savage for undergraduate student research with the McMaster University Research Ethics Board (MREB).

program grows, online forums in which the entire cohort is asked to participate simultaneously may not be the optimal method of participation to create meaningful student engagement online.

b. Learning outcomes

The literature suggests that instructors need to establish the desired learning outcomes before they design the course. This allows teachers to build the course around the learning outcomes. When the focus group participants were asked about how the MCM program could be improved, some expressed concern that they did not receive the course materials on time. One participant said, "I feel that we are getting the materials and the syllabus late." It should be qualified that students were receiving the course materials on or slightly before the first day of term, but their perception is that they should be receiving them earlier. Other participants felt that what was expected of them was not always clear. Participant Four said, "Each class is different and you really need to know what the expectations are... we are all becoming better at budgeting our time, but we need to know well in advance and have clear expectations from the pros (sic)." Again, it should be noted that MCM course outlines are significantly more detailed in terms of learning outcomes, skills acquisition and schedule of readings and remittance of assignments. However, professional students who must balance family, work and degree program demands appear to require more management of expectations. The research data suggest that both the MCM instructors and students see the value in establishing clear learning outcomes before the course begins. However, the focus group results suggest that the MCM program may need to develop more consistency and formalize this procedure.¹³

c. Blended learning (online and residency)

The literature shows that online learning appears to be an effective option for both undergraduate and graduate students in a wide range of academic and professional studies. When the online classes are built on a foundation of solid pedagogical principles and foster student engagement, the studies are

13. These changes have been made, with clearer learning outcomes established and course expectations enumerated in a Student Faculty and TA Roles and Responsibilities document. Initial anecdotal evidence suggests that improvements are being noticed and appreciated by students, but a full analysis of the outcomes and effects of these changes will be made in a subsequent study.

optimistic about the value of online learning.

The participants in the focus group found the e-learning portion of the MCM program to be necessary, though, occasionally problematic. The participants noted that they received a tutorial on how to use Avenue to Learn and the webinar software at the beginning of the program, but that they remembered very few specifics of the tutorial later on.¹⁴ As a result, when they eventually needed to use the systems, they sometimes faced difficulties. There was a general consensus among the participants that they would benefit from having greater access to technical support and ongoing training throughout the school year.

The participants also indicated that the success of their online learning largely depended on how effectively the software systems were used. The participants reflected on their online learning experiences and noted that the most valuable online sessions through webinar were ones in which instructors: a) used structured sessions, b) provided students an agenda for the session, c) avoided background distractions or noise, and d) had a thorough understanding of the software. One participant stated that webinar is “ripe with potential if used effectively.” There was agreement that webinar software is a valuable online resource, when used effectively and underpinned by solid pedagogical principles.

Further, the students also indicated that the webinar sessions were more valuable when a visual aid such as a PowerPoint slideshow accompanied the lesson. The participants felt this gives students something tangible to refer to later and also engages other sensory functions while learning. Participants also suggested that having the sessions recorded was beneficial for future reference and review.

As a collective, the focus group participants enjoyed their residency periods. One participant said, “It [residency] is one of my favourite parts of the program.” Several of the participants said they enjoyed the residency because it gave them an opportunity to make face-to-face connections with their peers. Residency also allows students to network, as noted by Participant Six who said, “networking is the best part of residency.” Many of the participants agreed that networking is a crucial aspect of the program as it helps to build their career.

Many of the participants also suggested that residency provides an alternative environment to learn from other MCM students. Participant One commented, “It’s [residency] a great learning experience, we get to learn from each

14. It should be noted that these results report the students’ qualitative impressions of their experience, and are not the result of cognitive or behavioural testing.

other, just as much as we get to learn from the professors." Students deemed residency valuable because of the opportunity to learn from their professors and peers through face-to-face discussions, which is not achievable online.

During the focus group, students also made some recommendations about how to improve the residency periods. Several of the participants find it cumbersome to print and prepare large packages of course material – especially those who travelled to attend the residency and had to print the courseware from their hotels. One participant proposed that the program offer hard copies of the courseware materials for students who request a copy. Another participant recommended having a resource office available on location that is fully equipped with printers, paper and other resources.

The residency period is intensive for students and some found the late nights and early mornings challenging. Participants in the focus group said they enjoy the events in the evening, but would rather they end earlier. Also, the participants said that because they enjoy interacting with their peers they would like the residency period to include more time for social interaction and "hang outs" that are less structured.

Aside from these few minor suggestions, the participants concluded their discussion of residency by agreeing that, "it is essential to the program." All the participants established that residency is an invaluable part of the MCM program and that it added greatly to their learning experience.

When the students were asked about whether they would recommend the program to others, all agreed they would recommend the program, with many stating that they already have. While the students had some clear suggestions for improvement that align with the faculty's goals and what the literature supports, overall it is evident that they enjoyed the program and would encourage others to take it as well.

Discussion

It is apparent that many of the MCM faculty strategies for teaching and learning, learning outcomes and blended education align with the literature. The MCM program appears to be a leader in the development and application of communications management pedagogy through its blended approach to education. The IQAP self-study and retreat allowed the program director, staff and instructors to evaluate the MCM model and teaching methods, in order to identify challenges.

The MCM instructors agree that residency periods are important to the

program and help achieve learning outcomes. The literature, however, is not unanimous about the benefits of face-to-face learning. Some scholars provide a less optimistic view about the value-add of face-to-face learning if the course can be sustained online.

The focus group results provide a different conclusion about the value of blended learning than the literature review. Perhaps the variable that determines the success of blending learning is the *type of program* that is being taught. The studies completed in the literature were not studies that evaluated the need of face-to-face learning for a professional communications program. In a program such as the MCM, students probably want to develop their careers and learn from each other, which is why they perceive face-to-face interaction to be essential. In courses where student interaction is less important, perhaps face-to-face learning would not significantly contribute to the learning experience.

The results of the focus group suggest, contrary to elements in the literature, that a blending learning approach is important for a degree such as the MCM. The MCM is a program for professionals who have a considerable amount of expertise in their field. It is important to for the professionals in each cohort to connect and feel free to interact with their peers. The focus group helped to identify ways that the MCM program can improve and continue to lead pedagogy in the areas of teaching and learning roles, learning outcomes and the blended learning style. Students clearly see the value of the residency. In particular they value the team-building approach, which is valuable to their own sense of learning, as well as a sense of accomplishment with peers. They see it as useful for equipping them to better take advantage of the online segments.

In the faculty retreat instructors brainstormed and developed strategies for increasing engagement, efficiency and maximizing the technology. Many of their strategies corresponded with principles outlined by Creasmen and Pelz. For example, one long-time instructor suggested assigning a leader every week to lead and facilitate the discussion. This would place more emphasis on interactivity as well leave most of the work to the students.

Apart from the references above, little research has been done about the success of blended learning versus only online learning. This is still a growing field of research and there is much still to be explored. Since the MCM program continues to see success with the residency portion of the courses, it uses the blended learning model for the program. However, MCM should be following the developments in the literature, and, where possible, conducting its own assessment of the mix and type of blend of in-class and online pedagogy.

Conclusion

It is apparent that many of the MCM faculty strategies for teaching and learning, learning outcomes and blended education align with the literature. The MCM program appears to be a leader in the development and application of communications management pedagogy through its blended approach to education. The IQAP self-study and retreat allowed the program director, staff and instructors to evaluate the MCM model and teaching methods, in order to identify challenges. The MCM thus appears to be taking some leadership in the development and application of communications management pedagogy through its blended approach to education.¹⁵ Little previous research has been done on the effectiveness of blended learning for a professional communications program, and almost none specifically in Professional Communications Management programs at Canadian universities.

The discussions among faculty (in the retreat) and among students (in the focus group) both demonstrate a shared understanding of key strengths and challenges. In particular, more research should be conducted specifically on the role of teaching assistants within a professional graduate program. Interviews with teaching assistants may assist in identifying their current tasks to determine the role they play (and could play) in the graduate programs like MCM.

Finally, in light of the limited the pedagogical literature, as currently available on blended models for graduate professional education, programs such as McMaster University's blended MCM program are recommended to extend their work in discussing and publishing research with the instructors and students about how in-class and learning management systems may determine optimal mixes and best practices in delivery of professional communication education.

15. Although it is noteworthy that "on the ground" a final assessment from students suggest they approve, i.e. the IQAP self-study showed that 91% of MCM students and alumni surveyed would recommend the program to a friend or colleague.

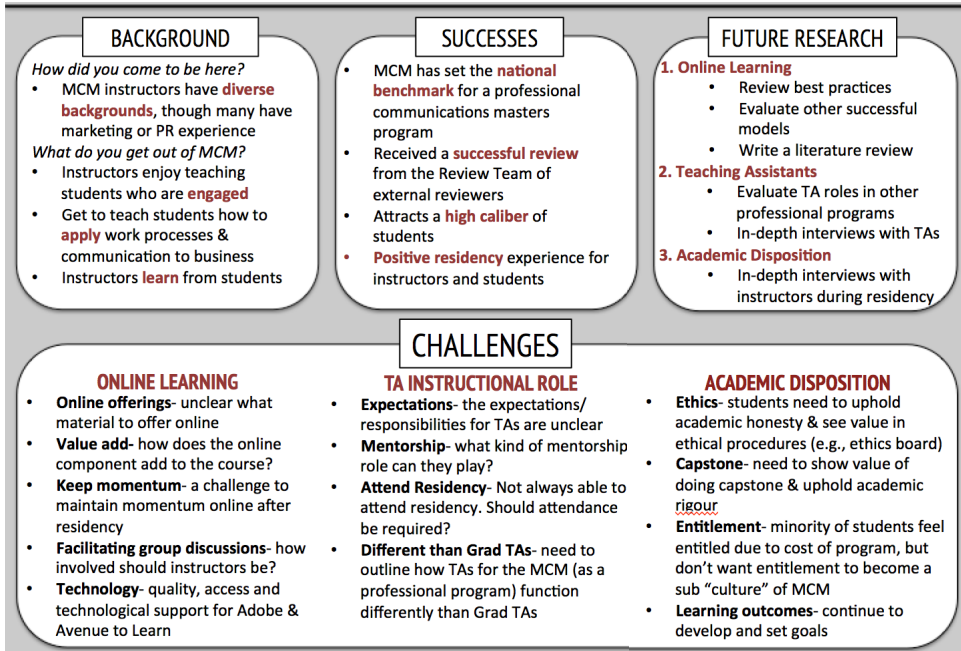
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Appendix 1

Faculty retreat results



Appendix 2

Focus group results

Participants	Purpose	Conclusion
<p>7 MCM students</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• 5 first years and 2 second years• 3 males and 4 females	<p>To determine the strengths and weaknesses of the residency experience and online portion of the MCM program.</p>	<p>While improvements can be made to the residency/online learning, overall the students are very satisfied with the MCM.</p>
Residency	Online Learning	
<p>All participants agree that they enjoy their residency experience and that it is essential to the program. Why?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Get to network with their peers• Learn from each other• Have valuable face-to-face discussions <p>Suggestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Have a resource office (printers, supplies)• Have prepared courseware packages/syllabuses• Provide clear expectations well before residency begins• Have bonding socials for students	<p>Participants have mixed opinions about the online systems [Adobe Connect & A2L]. Students suggest that the success of the online tools varied based on how the systems were used.</p> <p>Suggestions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide more technical support to students• Have more structured online sessions with a clear plan & limit background distractions• Provide a visual component for Adobe Connect sessions (possibly a PPT)• Have smaller discussion groups• Pre-record sessions so students can access material at any time or any place	

Appendix 3

The Strategies to online learning

Before the online course begins:

- Three weeks before the course begins explain to the students how lectures are structured and formatted;
- Organize the online content by sections: case studies, readings, assignments, amongst other items;
- Introduce a calendar that contains all the assignments and readings;
- Get students involved and excited before the course begins (instructor introduce who they are and ask students to introduce themselves);
- Create a widget for separate web pages;
- Provide tutorials and training for the online learning sites.

Once the online course has started:

- Train them to check Avenue to Learn so they are socialized to online learning;
- Have an “end of the week announcement” to tie things up, reinforce content and provide closure to the week’s content.

During the online course:

- Continue to update grades, so students have their most current marks;
- Continue to involve students in active discussions;
- Be responsive to questions and comments.

Other potential strategies:

- Perhaps have a video lecture — Royal Roads does video lectures (all posted on YouTube);
- Have discussion leaders every week and at the end of the week have the instructor respond and add summaries;
- Have student make a video blog to discuss content;
- Prerecord lectures to help save time plus students can refer to the lectures later;
- Provide summaries after lectures;
- Perhaps have slides that coordinate and speak with each slide – coordinate lecture with slides.