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Research Article

Transitioning into and improving online History teaching

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Abstract

Relatively little literature specific to the discipline of History aims to translate theory into practice in regard to designing effective online and flipped learning experiences. This article synthesises current literature into practical advice and reflects on previous experience as an aid to historians (a) tasked with developing online or flipped units or (b) who have transitioned online and are seeking ways to improve. Feedback from students and learning analytics from a flipped unit at a large Australian university underpin the paper's advice. Student feedback and behaviour, coupled with the reflections of the unit's designers, encourage (1) prioritising effective educational media and recording practices over the production of digital material with the longest shelf life, (2) explicit consideration of unit structure and support offered to students, (3) readings which consider the student perspective, (4) enthusiasm about the delivery format, and (5) the overarching importance of constructive alignment.

Key words: History teaching, online, flipped, videos, reading, enthusiasm, constructive alignment, student engagement

Introduction

When we first conceived this paper, our vision for its readership was different to now. We initially couched its value in the strategic documents of universities across Australia. Looking across the sector, visions for 21st century teaching are usually expressed in the same terms: it will be 'innovative', 'flexible' and 'digitally enhanced' (see Supplementary Appendix for examples from current strategic documents). For a field like the humanities, typically described as 'embattled' and which frequently expounds its value through emphasis on its graduates' attributes, these visions have far-reaching consequences (Campion, 2018). There is constant pressure to change and improve. Since we began reflecting on our aims, however, the world of secondary and tertiary teachers of History has changed dramatically. Almost every university changed to online-only delivery in 2020. Some have reverted to their traditional delivery patterns. Others will not. Furthermore, the dire financial position of many institutions (Zhou, 2021)—resulting in increasing pressure on History departments to deliver 'quality' teaching within tightening budgets—means that the conversation around teaching online is more important than ever. The reality is that being a good online teacher is now expected of most historians. Leaving recent developments aside, an underlying problem remains: for a teacher making the leap into online delivery, there is little literature which is grounded in the disciplinary norms of Ancient History and the Classics (some notable exceptions exist in modern History, e.g. Moses, 2017; Sendziuk & Buchanan, 2018).

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In this article we would like to draw on our experience in technology-enhanced delivery, complement existing writing (e.g. Barrow *et al.,* 2010; George, 2009; Goodwin & Quinlan, 2019; Pace, 2004), and address the need for more practical advice and examples for historians adapting to 'the new normal' of reduced contact hours, flipped delivery, and online education. We structure our discussion around several pillars of online and flipped delivery which emerged over several years teaching online and while coding the qualitative responses to an action research project conducted on a unit dedicated to Classical Greece. Our core themes span longstanding pedagogical principles (constructive alignment and unit structure), trends which COVID-19 accelerated (educational media), disciplinary concerns (readings and how to get students to look at them), and teacher behaviour (enthusiasm, support, and flexibility).

Context

This paper emerged from an action research project we conducted pre-COVID. Our aim was to capture feedback from History students and link it to current higher education research in order to provide practical advice to our colleagues. We focused on a unit designed and delivered by Shannahan with the support of Fredericks: a second-year unit on Classical Greece at a large Australasian university[1]. Broadly speaking, the university's students are more affluent than those of the average Australian university. The most recent multi-year data (2009–2019) records that an average of 8.4% of students at the university are from low socio-economic status post codes (national average: 16.5%); 6.6% are from regional and 0.25% from remote areas (national average: 19.2% and 0.93%), 0.89% of students identify as Indigenous

(national average: 1.6%), and 4.14% have a disability (national average: 5.6%), while 4.9% are from non-English speaking backgrounds (national average: 3.7%) (DESE, 2020). The university offers four Ancient History units. The units are introductory, serving aspiring secondary school teachers, students enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts program, international students, and students taking general education units outside of their major. As the unit's purview encompassed more than History majors, we were particularly concerned with designing something more than a 'survey' (Brawley, 2018; Van Sledright, 2007).

Our unit was 'flipped.' The logic behind a flipped unit is to move lecture material online and maximise active learning in the classroom. For us, the change meant that we needed to record short videos and podcasts, find readings, and write e-books and galleries to replace the unit's lectures. While a typical unit in History would have 24 hours of lectures and 12 hours of tutorials, this unit would substitute online content for lectures and have 13 hours of face-to-face tutorials.

Anonymised Learning Management System (LMS) logs and two optional surveys—approved by the university's research ethics panel—informed our findings beyond what we observed in the classroom. The first survey gathered reactions at the beginning of the semester; the second reviewed the unit and student preferences. 56 students participated in the entry survey. 37 students completed the exit survey. 48 students submitted the final assessment.

Several decades of research around transactional distance and consideration of our student cohort (students new to History and online learning) resulted in a tightly structured unit. Although it reduced autonomy, the structure helped reduce student misunderstanding (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018; Moore, 1989, 1991, 1993). Experience at other universities also informed the structure: we had seen elsewhere how easy it was for the best intentions in unit design to manifest as an online space which was difficult to navigate and maintain (e.g. cluttered with resources and content to such an extent that the key information was obscured). Therefore, in Classical Greece, the LMS divided the learning space by week, with each week broken into several steps (Figures 1 and 2). A three-minute audio file introduced the week's key themes, summarised the preceding week's content where relevant, and made a point of highlighting interesting material which students would encounter. After the audio introduction a summary/checklist noted the number of tasks in the week, whether the tasks contained videos, readings, or something else, and their length. Each task followed. Tasks included a brief introduction to the content and provided guidance on key themes, questions, and/or issues on which students should take notes.

Pillar 1. Effective Educational Media

When asked to rank the modes of content delivery used in the unit, students overwhelmingly preferred videos by the lecturer (Table 1). Their responses aligned with the research on student attitudes to learning: most prioritise their interaction with the teacher (Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Gregory, 2007; Maddrell et al., 2017, 253). While before 2020 a proportion of historians might never have used recording facilities available on campuses, COVID likely prompted many staff to explore this space. Regardless of one's experience—from working with an editor to record a tightly-scripted welcome video to uploading an old lecture recording—there often isn't much advice aside from 'avoid recreating traditional lectures' when moving online (Brame, 2015; Kay, 2012; Mayer, 2008; Mayer & Moreno, 2003; Wijnker et al., 2019, fig 3). What should a novice know? What does the literature say which might help us improve?
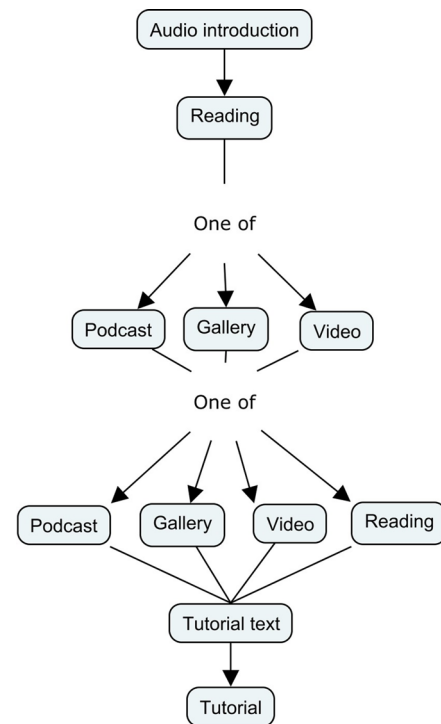

Figure 1. How one week of content might be structured.

Pedagogically speaking, videos are valuable tools to establish instructor presence and cover key topics. In our unit, establishing presence could be as simple as preparing friendly, text-based welcome announcements at the start of the semester and including the instructor's face in the introductory videos. Students will engage more if they know who they are listening to (Shea et al., 2005; see further below, section 4). This is especially important when teaching online—an environment which exacerbates student feelings of isolation (see below). Once this presence has been established it is less important that later videos show the instructor's face. Slides limited the cognitive load on students by using a simple background, showing key words and texts, and showing high-quality images of objects as they were discussed. In this regard, museum websites (e.g. of the British Museum) and WikiCommons proved invaluable so as to avoid grainy, low-quality images which may imply lack of preparation or care (see Vallade & Kaufmann, 2020 and comments below on enthusiasm).

In terms of practicalities, most of our videos were 'mini-lectures'. Every video had a specific function (e.g. preparation for an assessment, feedback, or raising awareness of a particular issue). 'Chunking' content in such a way that there were small videos dedicated to specific issues, often interspersed between readings and tasks for the week, embedded variety in the unit and allowed us to move away from long lecture videos which might overload students. This strategy also aimed to increase the flexibility of the unit: students could log in to complete one or two tasks, rather than feeling that they needed to set aside a long period of time to engage. For example, week two introduced students to 'dark age' Greece, Greek colonisation, and Homer and Hesiod. The material was covered with a mini-lecture on Greece's dark age and colonisation; a mini-lecture which introduced Homer and Hesiod; a reading on the challenges of Greek 'myth' and 'history'; and the first 500 lines of the *Iliad* (which the introductory text noted would serve as the basis for the following week's tutorials).

Week 3: Greek tyranny
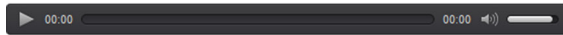
Audio transcript

There are four steps to complete in Week 3

1. A 20-minute video on Greek colonisation
2. Two readings on Greek tyranny, totalling 19 pages
3. A collection of ancient sources on Athenian tyranny (22 pages)
4. A 10-minute video on Athenian coinage

(i) Your tutorial this week is based on last week's reading of Homer and selections of Hesiod's *Theogony* (about 8 pages)

Step 1 (a video): Greek colonisation

The video below discusses the explosion of Greek colonisation throughout the Mediterranean in the 8th and 7th centuries BCE. By the end of it, you will know where the Greeks settled, and what characterised their settlements.

It is important that you have read about Homer before learning about Greek colonisation - the *Odyssey* told stories of proto-colonial heroes to the Greeks. Myths of the return of warriors who fought at Troy shaped the perceptions not only of Greek colonists (brave; unlimited, fertile land for them to work on), but indigenous peoples (lawless; easy to dominate) - e.g. the *Odyssey* 9.107-40. In 1998, Irad Malkin published a hugely influential book dedicated to this exact topic (It's in the library if you are interested in ethnology, anthropology, and colonisation. It's called *The Returns of Odysseus*.).

Week 3
GREEK COLONISATION

In the video I mentioned Nancy Demand's characteristics of Greek settlements. If you want to read her comments, you can find them here:

Demand, N. (2013). *A history of Ancient Greece in its Mediterranean context* (3rd ed.). Cornwall-on-Hudson: Sloan. pp. 111-20.

Step 2 (a reading): Greek tyranny - what is it? How did it come about?

First, it's a good idea to do some background reading on Greek tyranny. Read the *Encyclopedia of Ancient History* s.v. Tyranny to learn what it's all about.

↗ The Encyclopedia of Ancient History s.v. tyranny

In the seventh and sixth centuries BCE, tyranny swept across the Greek world. The most famous of them controlled Athens for thirty years (you'll read about them below), but not all of Greek history is *Athenian* history. The following book excerpt will talk you through the main examples of tyranny in archaic Greece, and note the origins of this system of government. By the end of the reading, make sure that you can describe some leading causes of tyranny, and provide examples of tyrants/where and how tyranny took root.

Our week four tutorial will focus on the good and bad things about tyrannical government. If you want to cut down on your tutorial reading, while taking notes, also make note of the good and bad things tyrants did for the Greeks.

Access the reading here:

↗ Buckley, T. (2010). *Aspects of Greek History: 750-323 BC* (2nd ed.). New York: Routledge. pp. 40-54.

Figure 2. An example of how content would appear on Moodle.[3]

The longest mini-lecture was 25 minutes; the shortest was 8 minutes. The average length was 14 minutes. Most videos were audio recorded over slides in a studio. This format allowed us—after training—to record without AV support staff, avoid lengthy production times, and retain professional-quality picture and sound.

The recording process, while initially daunting, proved to be an extremely valuable form of professional development. Once we became comfortable, we extended our use of media into every other delivery format, providing cohort-wide feedback on quizzes and essays, answering questions which arose in class, and providing assessment tips. Reflecting on our progress, the conceptual breakthrough which changed videos from daunting to fun and radically improved the quality was realising that delivery did not need to be perfect. One's goal should be a 'conversational tone' (Mayer, 2008, 766–767)—i.e. delivering material as though one were speaking in a live classroom (while still avoiding digressions and meandering). Just as student engagement improves when instructor presence is established, students will engage more when it sounds like the presenter is speaking specifically to them (Brame, 2015). Academics are not actors. Reading a script word-for-word

Table 1. Students ranking which media they preferred

	1	2	3	4	5
Videos made by the lecturer	84%	10%	4%	2%	0%
Videos featuring historians from other universities/ made by others	0%	54%	30%	10%	6%
Galleries	0%	16%	18%	42%	24%
Readings	8%	12%	18%	28%	34%
Podcasts	8%	8%	30%	18%	36%
					Total responses = 50

can sound artificial, as does a recording which is clearly generic and founded not on what students need at a particular time, but on a desire to never update it. We found that we could not compete with professional newsreaders or documentarians and only sounded stilted when attempting to deliver a piece to camera perfectly. Acknowledging this fact, we resorted to a style similar to teaching face to face—we would consider what to say, rehearse, then take notes and a stopwatch into the recording studio. We would sacrifice perfect delivery in order to sound natural.

Ultimately, in a world where universities now compete with the Khan Academy, YouTube, and MOOCs, it is no longer possible to avoid multimedia. Taking time to practise and knowing that one will improve is critical to moving into the online space. We found that our students did not expect us to match documentarians. We need to recognise that our students prize their interaction with instructors and our educational media should acknowledge that: we should film in such a way that our passion and enthusiasm comes through the screen (Booth, 2018); we should make the learning experience feel personal and customised to each cohort. If appearing on screen, there are now excellent blog posts from academics providing further practical tips on setting up the camera and sound (Borup, 2021). In our view, this pragmatic approach to media assuaged valid student doubts that the shift to online delivery was about creating generic, profitable online units (Costa *et al.,* 2018 and below), and demonstrated that online delivery had its advantages in allowing greater flexibility for content delivery.

Pillar 2. Flexibility, motivation, and support

The flexibility of flipped learning is a recurring theme of the literature (Bergmann, 2012; O'Flaherty & Phillips, 2015, 85–86;

Vanslambrouck *et al.,* 2018). Certainly we assumed students would enjoy the chance to log into the LMS whenever it was convenient for them. Furthermore, when asked, 65% of our students strongly agreed with the notion that completing work whenever they wanted was a strength. Student behaviour, however, added perspective. The image below (Figure 3) illustrates activity at different times of day. Tutorials were held from 0900–1000 on Thursdays; 1300–1400 on Fridays, and 1400–1500 on Fridays.

What might others make of this information? First, there was a clear increase in activity the evening before class and immediately prior to and during tutorials. Secondly, Saturday and Sunday were the days of the week with the least activity. Thirdly, there was no overwhelming trend of working later in the evening. While the flexibility was certainly an advantage for some students, we were surprised to see that most students continued working during business hours. For us, the literature and our experience highlighted that we should not enter the online space believing that students will radically shift their behaviour away from what occurs in a traditional delivery model.

Our students were, however, concerned about the support available and the requirement to learn independently.

- 'I think in theory it [the flipped model] is a good format, but in practice it fosters a strong sense of detachment from the course.'
- 'Have to be independently driven to keep up. Easy to fall behind if you don't do the readings regularly…. Less contact hours means kind of lonely…'
- 'I think the hardest thing with this format is finding the time to do the content as because it is just there you kind of put it of[f] where as [sic] with a lecture there is a set time that you have to be somewhere and can't avoid.'

Moreover, students felt that our unit consumed more time than others (Costa *et al.,* 2018, 145; Sheail, 2018).

- 'The course work often ended up taking me an extremely long time because the readings and the videos and the writings tasks and the note taking all added up. It was enjoyable content but quite intense.'
- 'The readings were sometimes quite long, I think - to write adequate notes on them as well as thoroughly reading them would take me longer than 2 hours.'

Neither theme in the feedback surprised us. Online learning can make students feel lost and isolated. Our student feedback also leads us to the second and third components of this section: we must consider how (a) our units can motivate students to learn (O'Connell & Lang, 2018; Sun *et al.,* 2018) and (b) the unit supports students. Using structure, instructions, and formative tasks to
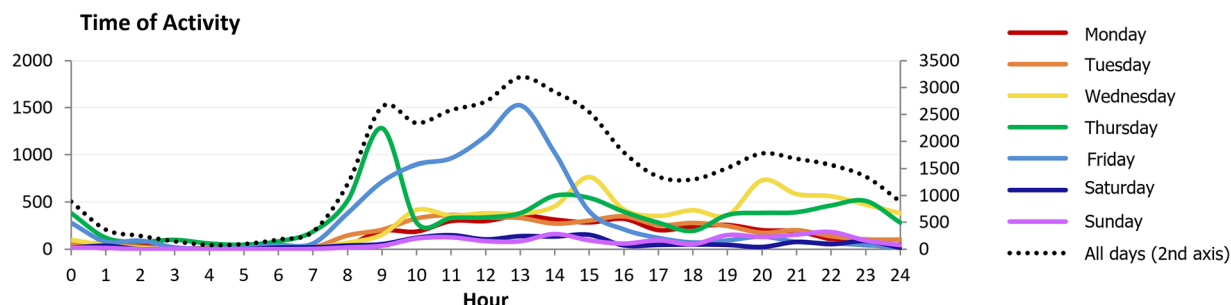

Figure 3. Illustration of when students interacted with the Moodle page during semester. Produced with KEATs Analytics: Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning, King's College London. CC-BY-NC.

Table 2. Completion rates for the unit's non-assessed, online quizzes

Quiz number	Timing	Attempters	Non-attempters	% attempted
1	Week 1	53	1	98%
2	Week 4	51	1	98%
3	Week 7	46	6	88%
4	Week 9	39	13	75%
5	Week 11	35	17	67%

provide achievable goals and a sense of progression is crucial to developing the skills necessary to thrive online (Cho & Shen, 2013; see also comments on transactional distance, above).

Five formative, non-assessed quizzes provided additional motivation and increased the visibility of student progress. A five-minute feedback video, providing further readings and explaining the answers, accompanied each quiz. We set clear deadlines for quiz completion and communicated them in tutorials and through LMS announcements. We also used Moodle's activity-tracking function to send reminders to students who did not meet deadlines. The quizzes gave students a semi-regular goal to work towards, feedback on their progress, and demonstrated the relevance of online material. On the one hand, student participation declined over time (Table 2). On the other hand, several students commented that they felt the online quizzes kept their learning 'on track' throughout the semester. In any case, context is important. Automated quizzes are fine in moderation, but we must not make our online units a string of tick-box exercises or assessments which encourage superficial ideas of unit engagement (Dyment *et al.,* 2020). In a world disrupted by a pandemic, with many units converted to online delivery, we must also resist the temptation to overload students with notifications or nudges. As a simplistic example of the risk, we might consider the amount of notifications distributed in one unit and multiply them by however many units in which the student is currently enrolled. The resulting number might serve as an indication of how many notifications a student receives during the semester (in addition to institution- and faculty-wide communications). We might, in turn, reflect on whether we ourselves would pay attention to the nudges or begin to ignore them as spam. In essence, our experience told us to align every quiz with other components of the unit, vary the mechanisms which provide students with motivation, and above all, look for opportunities for students to explore something they find interesting.

In regards to support, a central tenet of our approach to online learning is that students are not necessarily 'digital natives' (see Bennett & Maton, 2010 and its references) who inherently enjoy being online, understand LMSs, or know how to learn online (see also Kilgour *et al.,* 2018: Table 3). During the pandemic, another key consideration is whether students are immediately displeased at the prospect of learning online: is this what they 'signed up' for? A unit's design needs to ensure that students feel comfortable in the online environment and that they develop the skills necessary to succeed (Booth, 2001; Fink, 2013).

The need to support learners resulted in guidance for students on note-taking (most students are trained to take notes from live lectures, not readings and videos), time management, and interacting with others online. Most universities have these study skills resources available to upload or embed. In terms of design, we adapted Salmon's five-stage model to online learning (Salmon,

2002: chap. 2). The first stage is to give students an opportunity to learn how to learn online and how the LMS works. As with all generic academic skills, we should not assume that someone else will have taught our students how to learn online. In our case, dedicating time to these skills resulted in surprisingly few questions and troubleshooting problems in comparison to other online courses we have taught—the unit's design precluded many standard questions one would expect from students needing advice. In week one, for example, support manifested as follows. The semester began with a welcome message delivered to every student's email and LMS inbox. The message told students how to access the unit's website and what to do before the first class. After logging in, students were greeted with a video where the convenor introduced himself and the unit. The purpose was to establish a friendly presence, let students know who they could contact with questions, and give them specific instruction in what to do next. The next video, marked as optional, showed the layout of the unit's webpage, how to use different features, and where resources were available on assessments, rubrics, readings, and help. Following these support videos, typical content appeared: discipline-specific readings and a video on the dark ages. Finally, the LMS instructed students to complete a formative quiz which consolidated knowledge, scaffolded skills, and provided a low-stakes opportunity for students to learn how to use a common feature of Moodle. At the end of the week a face-to-face tutorial took place where the lecturer continued to establish a teaching presence, broke the ice, answered questions, and continued introducing students to Greek History.

Ultimately, the support and motivation we offer to students is multifaceted and complex. While it is easy to be distracted by the benefits of flexible delivery, students want and need more than vague instructions, absent or disinterested staff, and complicated LMS layouts. We must be conscious of how our students will learn to learn online, how they will progress through the course if we are not in the room to offer immediate advice, and how they can become resourceful in leading their own learning. Students are most satisfied when we support them in such a way that they believe they can succeed (Alqurashi, 2019, 144).

Pillar 3. Appropriate readings (and a reason to look at them)

Student comments on readings:

- 'Depends on the readings, but I found them longer and more complex than listening to a video about the same topic. I feel I can benefit more writing notes from a video or a lecture than readings.'
- 'The readings for this course often contained more detail than what a traditional course might otherwise teach, including the relevance of secondary historical characters and the opinions of a wide variety of ancient sources. This provided a useful gateway

Table 3. Student responses to questions about their readings

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Readings were the right length	2 (5%)	19 (51%)	6 (16%)	10 (27%)	0 (0%)
The readings were hard to Understand	2 (5%)	13 (35%)	6 (16%)	12 (32%)	4 (11%)
The readings provided relevant information	24 (65%)	11 (30%)	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	0 (0%)

into topics I personally found interesting, and did not limit my learning only to the information needed to complete the course.'
• 'Too long! More videos would be preferred, readings take ages to go through.'

Working in a Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, we valued reading intrinsically. Readings do not simply transmit information. In our unit they introduced key ancient and modern texts to students, exposed students to different styles of writing, exemplified the use and citation of sources in Ancient History, and provided secondary sources which we wanted students to use when researching for their essays. But, even with traditional face-to-face units, one common comment is 'the students won't read the texts— how do I get them to read?' One response we've heard frequently— and which we have tried ourselves—is to implement short, low-weight assessment tasks. In our experience teaching and developing curricula in multiple disciplines, one should be cautious of this approach. While it may result in increased engagement when applied to a single unit, it is typically superficial (Dyment *et al.,* 2020). And the problems compound when the practice spreads across many units: students need to complete dozens of assessment tasks—usually multiple every week. They become fatigued. They increasingly resort to surface learning in order to survive the semester as they lurch from task to task. Winding back from such practices is equally difficult: when one convenor reduces overassessment in their unit, the change is not enough to help students. Students still need to complete dozens of tasks in their other units, so they continue to prioritise assessable tasks. They seemingly confirm that the assessable tasks were necessary for student motivation. It takes a concerted effort across multiple unit coordinators to wind back the damage caused by an entire department using assessment primarily as a motivator. Rather than over-assess, we recommend reflecting on the value of every reading and providing instructions for how to use, digest, and employ the reading in tutorials, exercises, assessments, and learning.

While coding survey responses, one theme emerged which clarifies this advice and may help explain why students often do not completely engage with their prescribed texts: reading was described as an inherently active process. It was demanding, time-consuming[2], and required a high level of concentration (far more than a video or lecture). The literature aligns with our student's commentary and supports one key action for unit designers: ensure that students perceive the value of what they're reading (Manarin, 2019, 19).

Although it is a flawed metric—most readings included maps, images, and/or were translated source excerpts with ample paragraph spacing and introductions—we note that students averaged 43 pages of reading (in addition to their tutorial texts) each week. Each week usually relied on a standard textbook to survey chronology or a theme (e.g. Pomeroy *et al.,* 2012 on Spartan society) videos to explore topics in depth (e.g. ancient warfare), and a primary source tutorial text (e.g. Xenophon. *Const. Lac.*). The text

description introduced each reading and gave structure to what students should heed. Whole-of-unit design was also critical: we created a table summarising the reading in every week and balanced the amount of reading against other unit demands and tutorial text length. For example, in the week when the unit's annotated bibliography was due, the tutorial required students to read two inscriptions and we only assigned short readings online.

In this unit, having evaluated its performance and reflected on the experience, we feel the reading was excessive. 'Reducing readings' is, however, a recommendation specific to our design— others may not find the same issues. A broader recommendation is: balance workloads and carefully consider the extent to which assessment is used as a motivation tactic. Consider what else students are being asked to do in the context of the unit and their studies. Does the department typically have an essay due in week 10? In that case, don't bother asking students to complete large, dense readings at the same time. Does one week contain lengthy or particularly dense articles? Maybe in the following week the tutorial can rely on more visual material or shorter texts. Balancing workloads gives students space to breathe, catch up, and refresh. Our students certainly seemed appreciative when tutorials had two-page readings in the weeks that assessments were due. LMS structure is also a factor: providing a summary of expected work each week on Moodle helped students plan their workload. This recommendation, while based on readings, should flow into all aspects of unit design. Design a natural ebb and flow (varying between types of sources discussed in tutorials; types of activities in class; types of media used in online lessons). Vet the readings and explicitly talk about them in class. In conversation with our students, it became clear that often students could not understand the relationship between their texts and what transpired in class. We needed to demonstrate it.

Pillar 4. Enthusiasm

One of the persistent features of student feedback was commentary on the teacher.

• 'When you go to a lecture there is a clear time set out where you must turn up to class. When you have a good lecturer this is the perfect slot to concentrate in but again having a boring lecturer would make a two hour lecture hard.'
• 'I think that the success of this model could depend on the quality of the tutor themselves, and in this case, it works well, as [Lecturer] is a great tutor who forges personal connections with his students.'
• '[Lecturer] is doing a great job, and he is a very engaging teacher.'

The student feedback reflected what we have long known: interactions with the instructor and the instructor's attitude to e-learning are critical factors for success in technology-enhanced learning and teaching (Alqurashi, 2019; Bolliger & Halupa, 2018; Bolliger & Martin, 2018; Long *et al.,* 2017; Sun *et al.,* 2008).

Table 4. Student responses in the entry survey to a series of hypothetical weaknesses of the unit

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
I would prefer to listen to a lecturer deliver a lecture	3 (6%)	12 (24%)	12 (24%)	14 (27%)	10 (20%)
I learn better by listening to a lecturer	4 (8%)	14 (27%)	11 (22%)	14 (27%)	8 (16%)
I am concerned that there is no one to help me	1 (2%)	9 (18%)	8 (16%)	13 (25%)	20 (39%)
The information on Moodle is difficult to understand/the information is not clear	0 (0%)	6 (12%)	5 (10%)	18 (25%)	22 (43%)
There is too much reading when a course is in this format	5 (10%)	13 (25%)	13 (25%)	10 (20%)	10 (20%)
Online material is boring	0 (0%)	6 (12%)	8 (16%)	21 (41%)	16 (31%)
The online site/material is unstable and/or poorly accessible on my devices	0 (0%)	3 (6%)	1 (2%)	19 (37%)	28 (55%)

In History, a field traditionally seen as slightly stuffy, enthusiasm is critical (Booth, 2018). When it comes to flipped and online learning, it is crucial to ask whether the teacher's 'heart is in it' (Comber & Brady-Van den Bos, 2018, 694). Without a desire for the model to succeed or a willingness to adapt practice, a flipped or online classroom will struggle (see, for example, Vallade & Kaufmann, 2020)—many students are immediately sceptical of online learning (see below) and will follow what the teacher models. Enthusiasm will increase student satisfaction (Arbuckle & Williams, 2003). Student satisfaction also increases with good design of online tasks, for example creating fora which are more than Q&A sessions (e.g. the framework in Verenikina *et al.*, 2017), or applying literature to create pedagogically sound activities (Salmon, 2002).

Speaking practically, the first week is critical to success. We outlined above how we established presence. Building a rapport with students was crucial to allaying fears of isolation and ensuring that students continued engaging with the unit (Glazier, 2016). One student identified continuing engagement as a particular problem of a flipped unit ('it is easy to ignore the work load as you have no allocated time that you feel you need to focus just on [the unit]'). We made a point of answering emails promptly, set expectations for study and in-class habits, and set aside time in the first weeks of the semester to support students who needed extra help (Salmon, 2011, 242; the first tutorial and online activity were designed to identify and support students who struggled with technology or the flipped model). Group activities in the first classes not only broke the ice, but gave the lecturer an opportunity to speak with students in small groups and help students form relationships. When teaching via Zoom or Microsoft Teams or BlackBoard Collaborate Ultra, part of this experience is creating activities which teach students how to use the platform (e.g. whiteboards and breakout rooms) and providing them with safe ways to get used to the new technology (e.g. starting with anonymous submissions or text-only submissions via chat).

Enthusiasm is not, however, a simplistic focus on 'what the teacher does' (Biggs, 1999). It is also about the traditional class behaviour which many historians already do—ensuring that our enthusiasm for our discipline extends into the effort we put into designing good units for our students. While most of the above has focused on positive aspects where students indicated what they would like, there were negative comments. One student felt that the videos were irrelevant; another felt they were being cheated because online learning was inferior to normal university learning; in previous years a student told us that flipped delivery was an excuse for the lecturer to put their feet on their desk and avoid doing their job. The comments were a timely reminder that education is not

one size fits all. Equally, not every delivery method will suit every teacher—we need to work with our strengths and seek help if we feel a delivery model is dissonant with our usual methods. Regardless, it is important to remember that students will quickly infer their instructor's attitude to teaching and a particular mode of delivery, and student satisfaction has a relationship with the behaviour modelled before them.

Pillar 5. Constructive Alignment

'Alignment' is ubiquitous in higher education. Nonetheless, now that many History teachers have been forced to take their traditional unit and rapidly adapt it for online, flipped, or reduced-contact-hours delivery, the principle's original intentions bear repeating (Loughlin *et al.*, 2020). Eliminating unnecessary components, carefully considering the role of content within our units (Weimer, 2014), incorporating meaningful and manageable assessment tasks, and linking the different components are critical if students are to engage, learn, and perceive the value of the experience (Stamov Roßnagel *et al.*, 2020).

One of the most challenging aspects of teaching online is that there is nowhere to hide: statistics show the number of students who watched lectures or clicked on tutorial readings. If these numbers are not what we want, we must ask ourselves tough questions. Is design the problem? Is there a mismatch between what we think is valuable and what students think is valuable? Or have we just got something wrong? The activity logs above, and a passing comment there, provide an example of what students need when learning online. Student activity spiked before tutorials (see above, Figure 3 and comments there). The spike in activity suggests some success in aligning the unit. Students felt compelled to look at the 'flipped' content before coming to class. Activity over the entire semester confirmed that students regularly engaged with the online material. Figure 4 shows that students regularly checked the Moodle page throughout the semester, with a slight decline after the mid-semester break (after 23/09). Students, on average, visited the site on 44 days of the semester, which translates to three days a week across the 13-week teaching period leading to 29/10, when they submitted their final assessment).

Backwards design is key to constructive alignment (Angelo, 2012, 97). Often, when we design a unit, we start with the unit's theme (e.g. Greek History). We then create a rough list of the topics we'd like to talk about. Usually we'll have implicit standards which inform what topics we think should be discussed (e.g. religion or government). After that, we might create a list of lecture topics and texts to read (e.g. Thucydides' Melian dialogue). Assessment is often considered
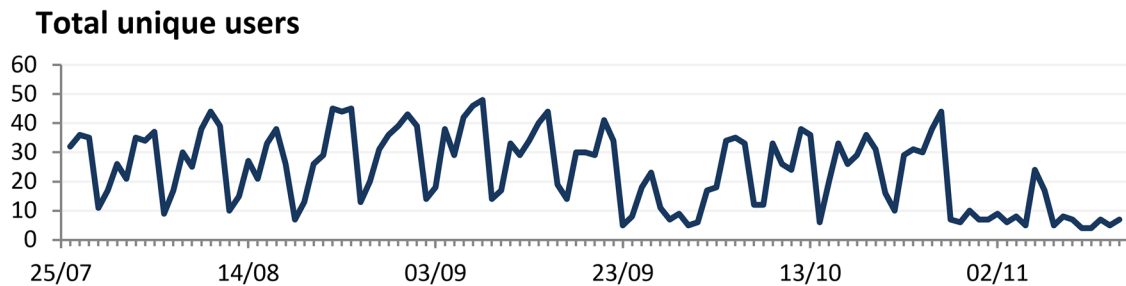
Total unique users

Figure 4. Total unique student users per day during semester. Produced with KEATs Analytics: Centre for Technology Enhanced Learning, King's College London. CC-BY-NC.

separately and follows traditional methods. The problem is that, on the one hand, by the time we write our lectures, we're focused on our implicit idea of the broad topic and fleshing out the list of lecture topics and texts we wrote earlier. On the other hand, our assessments have little to do with anything we are doing in the classroom. A cynical student will not bother showing up or preparing. 'What's the point?' they ask, 'this tutorial is irrelevant to the essay question, and the droning in lectures doesn't seem to have a point besides "It's nice to know"' (a surface learner, in Biggs & Tang, 2011's terminology: 17–20, 24–27). Instead, start by designing meaningful learning outcomes. Rethink assessments to evaluate those outcomes and reflect critically on whether a particular format is appropriate. Then begin thinking about what students will do in class to help them attain learning outcomes, succeed in their assessments, and engage. Then return to the assessments and refine again.

This overarching principle of 'designing with the end in mind' transformed the online material, aligned the entire unit, resulted in the value of each task being explicit, and, when coupled with in-class and online techniques to engage students, resulted in a positive outcome for all parties.

By the end of the semester, 68% of the students said they would prefer to take a History unit delivered in this format, rather than any of the traditional or fully-online units offered elsewhere in the School. For a first attempt, to be improved with each teaching cycle, we were pleased with the result. Nonetheless, engaging in the process made the amount of time and effort involved in effectively 'flipping' a unit clear.

The experience of teaching the unit—realising the importance of teacher presence and alignment; appreciating the ways students engage with readings and videos; understanding the need to develop student skills in learning online and making no assumptions about their abilities in this new space—was enlightening. Strategic documents of the last five years across Australasia indicate that, regardless of the pandemic, universities want more innovation in our delivery methods. Now that we have all been forced to teach online, we should work hard to improve our methods and, even if reverting to traditional modes of teaching, incorporate the lessons we learned to improve our standard offerings.

Supplementary material

The supplementary material for this article can be found at https://doi.org/10.1017/S2058631022000046.

Notes

1 For the sake of convenience, the paper uses 'we' throughout, even when referring to classroom practice or recording preferences.
2 See also Douglas *et al.* (2016, p. 262) and Comber and Brady-Van den Bos (2018, p. 689) which note that students often perceive flipped classrooms to be more work. Students don't see the workload as 'flipped' (moved from the classroom to an online space) but rather as additions to their workload.
3 Harmodius and Aristogeiton: Elliot Brown via WikiCommons (CC BY 2.0). Book icon: Hk kng via NounProject.com (CC BY 3.0). Film icon: Wilfredor via WikiCommons (Public Domain). External link icon: Dave Gandy via Font Awesome (https://fortawesome.github.com/Font-Awesome) (CC BY SA). Information icon: Davivongsa Parthrpol via NounProject.com (CC BY 3.0).

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