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IMMERSIVE LEARNING APPROACHES IN TEACHER PREPARATION WITHIN A BLOCK TEACHING MODEL

Huseyn Aliyev[•]

Abstract. The modernization of teacher education requires the use of innovative pedagogical methods to increase the effectiveness of professional learning. One of the most promising trends is the integration of integrative learning into the block learning model. Immersive learning focuses on creating an environment where learners are engaged and actively involved in meaningful learning experiences. Such methods in teacher education programs can significantly promote the development of professional competencies, critical thinking, and practical teaching skills. This study examines the application of integrative learning approaches to teacher education in the block learning model. The block learning model organizes the learning process through a series of compact, structured modules that allow students to focus on a specific topic or competency at a time. This model promotes a deeper understanding and practical application of pedagogical knowledge through integrative learning strategies such as simulations, interactive activities, collaborative activities, and technology-enabled environments. This study examines the pedagogical foundations of integrative learning and analyzes how these methods can be effectively integrated into block teacher education programs. Special emphasis is placed on the development of professional skills of future teachers, including lesson planning, classroom management, reflection, and the use of new teaching methods. The study also highlights the role of digital technologies and interactive learning environments in enhancing integrative learning experiences. The results suggest that integrating integrative learning into the block learning model can increase student engagement, improve learning outcomes, and promote the professional development of future teachers.

Keywords: student retention, active learning, immersive scheduling, block model, curriculum reform

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ИММЕРСИВНЫЕ (УГЛУБЛЁННЫЕ) ПОДХОДЫ К ОБУЧЕНИЮ В ПОДГОТОВКЕ УЧИТЕЛЕЙ В РАМКАХ БЛОЧНОЙ МОДЕЛИ ОБУЧЕНИЯ

Гусейн Алиев[•]

Абстракт. Модернизация подготовки учителей требует использования инновационных педагогических методов с целью повышения эффективности профессионального обучения. Одной из наиболее перспективных тенденций является интеграция интегративного обучения в блочную модель обучения. Иммерсивное обучение направлено на создание среды, в которой обучающиеся вовлечены в осмысленные образовательные практики и принимают в них активное участие. Подобные методы в программах подготовки учителей способны существенно способствовать развитию профессиональных компетенций, критического мышления и практических педагогических навыков. Данное исследование рассматривает применение интегративных подходов к обучению в системе подготовки учителей в рамках блочной модели обучения. Блочная модель обучения организует образовательный процесс посредством ряда компактных, структурированных модулей, позволяющих обучающимся сосредоточиться на конкретной теме или компетенции в определённый период времени. Эта модель способствует более глубокому пониманию педагогических знаний и их практическому применению за счёт использования интегративных образовательных стратегий, таких как симуляции, интерактивные виды деятельности, совместная работа и технологически ориентированные образовательные среды. В исследовании анализируются педагогические основы интегративного обучения и рассматриваются способы эффективной интеграции данных методов в программы блочной подготовки учителей. Особое внимание уделяется развитию профессиональных навыков будущих педагогов, включая планирование уроков, управление классом, рефлексию и использование новых методов обучения. Также в работе подчёркивается роль цифровых технологий и интерактивных образовательных сред в усилении интегративного образовательного опыта. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что интеграция интегративного обучения в блочную модель способствует повышению вовлечённости обучающихся, улучшению результатов обучения и стимулированию профессионального развития будущих учителей.

Ключевые слова: Удержание студентов в системе образования (непрерывность обучения), активное обучение, иммерсивное планирование, блочная модель, реформа куррикулума

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BLOK TƏDRİS MODELİ ÇƏRÇİVƏSİNDƏ MÜƏLLİM HAZIRLIĞINDA İMMERSİV (DƏRİNLƏŞDİRİLİMİŞ) ÖYRƏNMƏ YANAŞMALARI

Hüseyn Əliyev*

Abstrakt. Müəllim təhsilinin modernləşdirilməsi peşəkar təlimin effektivliyini artırmaq üçün innovativ pedaqoji metodların istifadəsini tələb edir. Ən perspektivli tendensiyalardan biri inteqrativ təlimin blok təlim modelinə inteqrasiyasıdır. İmmersiv təlim tələbələrin mənalı təlim təcrübələrində iştirak etdiyi və fəal şəkildə iştirak etdiyi bir mühit yaratmağa yönəlmişdir. Müəllim təhsili proqramlarındakı bu cür metodlar peşəkar səriştələrin, tənqidi düşüncənin və praktik tədris bacarıqlarının inkişafını əhəmiyyətli dərəcədə təşviq edə bilər. Bu tədqiqat blok təlim modelində müəllim təhsilinə inteqrativ təlim yanaşmalarının tətbiqini araşdırır. Blok təlim modeli tələbələrin eyni anda müəyyən bir mövzuya və ya səriştəyə diqqət yetirməsinə imkan verən bir sıra kompakt, strukturlaşdırılmış modullar vasitəsilə təlim prosesini təşkil edir. Bu model simulyasiyalar, interaktiv fəaliyyətlər, əməkdaşlıq fəaliyyətləri və texnologiyaya əsaslanan mühitlər kimi inteqrativ təlim strategiyaları vasitəsilə pedaqoji biliklərin daha dərindən başa düşülməsini və praktik tətbiqini təşviq edir. Bu tədqiqat inteqrativ təlimin pedaqoji əsaslarını araşdırır və bu metodların blok müəllim təhsili proqramlarına necə effektiv şəkildə inteqrasiya oluna biləcəyini təhlil edir. Xüsusi vurğu dərs planlaşdırması, sinif idarəçiliyi, düşüncə və yeni tədris metodlarının istifadəsi daxil olmaqla gələcək müəllimlərin peşəkar bacarıqlarının inkişafına yönəlmişdir. Tədqiqat həmçinin rəqəmsal texnologiyaların və interaktiv təlim mühitlərinin inteqrativ təlim təcrübələrinin gücləndirilməsindəki rolunu vurğulayır. Nəticələr göstərir ki, inteqrativ təlimin blok təlim modelinə inteqrasiyası şagirdlərin iştirakını artıra, təlim nəticələrini yaxşılaşdıra və gələcək müəllimlərin peşəkar inkişafını təşviq edə bilər.

Açar sözlər: tələbələrin təhsildə saxlanılması (davamlılığı), aktiv təlim, immersiv planlaşdırma, blok modeli, kurikulum islahatı

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1.Introduction

Universities around the world are seeking innovations in teaching and learning that will better engage students and retain them throughout their studies. Recent research into student attitudes shows that preferences for higher education are changing, with many students seeking flexible, blended and blended learning options. Evidence of this shift in HE student preferences can be seen in English-speaking universities in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US), as well as among international students in these international locations. It is increasingly important to identify and implement innovative models of higher education that take these preferences into account and create the conditions to improve student success and retention. The failure of students to complete or continue their studies in higher education institutions is considered a "malignant problem".

Student academic performance is a dynamic phenomenon with many contributing and interacting factors. Efforts to increase student completion rates often address isolated factors. Research at a regional university in Australia identified a range of personal issues that contribute to students dropping out of their studies (i.e., dropping out), including poor physical and mental health, competing demands from work and family, and low levels of attachment to peers, staff, and the institution. [8, s.20]

These findings are not unique and have been reported as factors in student dropout in other universities, including Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom and English Language Teaching (ELT) courses in non-English speaking countries. While universities can and should try to address issues such as student dependency on staff and other students, personal issues such as health and work commitments are more difficult for higher education providers to address. Significant changes to the traditional higher education system, such as the block system, are some of the strategies some higher education providers are using to improve teacher quality.

A literature review of higher education policies from above examples and best practices English includes a review of policies that were implemented and some positive changes in the education system that needed to be implemented also to explain teachers' practices. was created. A review of the literature on block, immersive, or intensive learning models in English-medium higher education institutions identifies three key principles of successful university education: (1) the use of purposeful learning through immersive learning blocks; (2) the use of active learning to enhance student engagement; and (3) the use of guided learning using blended curriculum content designed to develop student autonomy and foster learning communities.

Principle 1 – Focused Learning: Intensive Block Phase

Block models, such as those referred to as "intensive schedules" at Victoria University in Australia and the University of Plymouth in the UK, are based on the focused learning approach developed over 50 years ago at Colorado College in the USA. While traditional university models typically teach four subjects simultaneously over 12–15 weeks, block models, as used at Colorado College, focus intensively on only one subject at a time for significantly shorter periods of time (e.g., two to six weeks). These models are based on the theory of cognitive load, which states that human cognitive capacity is limited and that multitasking can overload learning capacity, which in turn can lead to improved cognitive performance. In general, at the macro level of learning, it can be observed that working on multiple subjects and tasks simultaneously can lead to lower learning outcomes.

Therefore, a trend has emerged towards fewer subjects being studied simultaneously in block, intensive and immersive learning models, which are referred to below as "immersive block learning models". Immersive block learning models promote greater concentration because they offer fewer competing demands than traditional university approaches. Walsh found that students who learned in a six-week model achieved higher grades and perceived this model as less stressful than traditional learning [6].

A recent article comparing data from over 3,000 students at a UK university showed that immersive learning led to significantly better academic performance. A study by Lawton at Vanderbilt University found that implementing a block learning model improved exam grades by almost a full grade on average across the entire university. An analysis of academic performance at VU found that students from certain socioeconomic groups, such as non-English speakers and students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, experienced improved learning outcomes with the block learning model. In addition to the focus provided by schedules, additional focus can be achieved through constructive alignment - an educational framework that ensures the purposeful design and implementation of learning objectives, learning activities, and assessment tasks. Clear learning objectives should be formulated, and assessment tasks should be designed so that students can demonstrate that they have achieved these objectives. Subsequently, learning activities should be designed to avoid unnecessary content and ensure the achievement of learning objectives [4].

Principle 2 – Active Learning: Beyond Passive Content Delivery

Immersive block models, through their planning, not only allow for greater focus, but also incorporate innovative approaches to content delivery. The active learning methods used in immersive, planned curricula encourage students to "make decisions, formulate problems, learn through inquiry, and actively participate in their education". This promotes student engagement,

networking, and community development, which has been shown to lead to higher academic achievement among heterogeneous student groups in immersive block models. This is particularly true for students from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in higher education as well as for international students. High levels of satisfaction have also been observed in some immersive block models, although the effect on satisfaction tends to be smaller and more variable than on performance. Based on social constructivist theory, active learning pedagogies emphasize that learning occurs through engagement, reflection, and socially embedded activities rather than through didactic approaches based on knowledge transfer.

For example, traditional didactic university lectures, where an instructor talks and students listen, have been shown to be less effective than more active approaches. A review of over 200 studies of undergraduate STEM courses found that academic performance improved in courses where students participated actively rather than passively. They argue that traditional didactic approaches are based on the information transfer fallacy—the assumption that students automatically learn something when it is explained to them. However, over 70 years of research in cognitive psychology has shown that passive learners are less able to learn and that students need to be attentive and engaged to learn successfully. Studies of the didactics of foreign language acquisition and academic literacy show essentially similar findings to these STEM learning studies: to acquire a skill, it is important to engage students in activities that focus on the application of that skill, rather than exposing them to it repeatedly and passively. When active learning methods are used, students generally perform better on college exams and improve their knowledge retention as well as their problem-solving skills in everyday life. For example, it improves students' ability to recall information later compared to simply reading. Providing feedback on students' answers to questions further improves memory compared to simply using questions. In addition, active learning methods can involve students in higher-order competencies such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation and develop their problem-solving and creativity skills.

Principle 3 – Guided Learning: Navigating the Learning Process with Confidence

Active learning takes many forms. Educational psychologists' analyses of active learning demonstrate the importance of teacher-directed learning experiences. Successful block learning is characterized by a clear and structured sequence of tasks, and thus differs from purely discovery-based learning, in which students independently acquire information and skills. Guidelines for best practices in block learning emphasize the need for careful curriculum planning and implementation to ensure appropriate learning pace

and scope. For example, Male recommended preparing students before class, monitoring their learning progress, and providing formative feedback on their learning behaviors. Nerantzi and Chatzidamianos emphasize the importance of face-to-face instruction in immersive block models, where teachers must "participate, engage, model participation, interact, comment, and provide feedback". Especially since the pandemic, higher education content delivery has increasingly adopted convergent or blended learning formats that combine face-to-face and online learning. Immersive block models typically guide students through synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities.

Such approaches have been shown to enhance students' self-confidence and independence, while contributing to better academic performance and greater satisfaction. Delivering learning materials as engaging content through online learning platforms gives students greater flexibility in the time and place of their learning. This practice reflects a shift away from the static, compartmentalized concept of the university and recognizes the increasing mobility of students who participate in different social spaces to develop a sense of belonging to the university. Online learning is increasingly establishing itself as a recognized form of learning. A 2022 survey in the United States found that 55% of Americans rated the quality of online learning as equal to, or in some cases better than, the quality of face-to-face learning. Despite the growing popularity of online learning opportunities, even after the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning is not universally preferred. When online materials are offered as part of an interactive block curriculum, it is important that learning platforms are specifically designed to maximize engagement and reduce cognitive load. [5, s.76]

Research shows that adding "interesting but irrelevant" texts and videos to multimedia learning materials can impair students' ability to process information and transfer acquired knowledge to new situations. This emphasizes the importance of selecting contextually relevant materials and excluding irrelevant elements. A curated approach to learning materials development implies a significant shift in the role of instructors: from content creation and knowledge transfer to curation and guidance of the learning process. Research on block and traditional semester-based learning shows that students learn more independently and manage their learning process better when instructors guide them through well-structured and engaging learning materials.

Regular feedback is another important way to support students in their learning and achieve their learning goals. Feedback can be provided through interactive learning materials such as quizzes, interactive widgets, and other interactive tasks; through in-class activities where instructors or students provide feedback during and after completing the task; and through

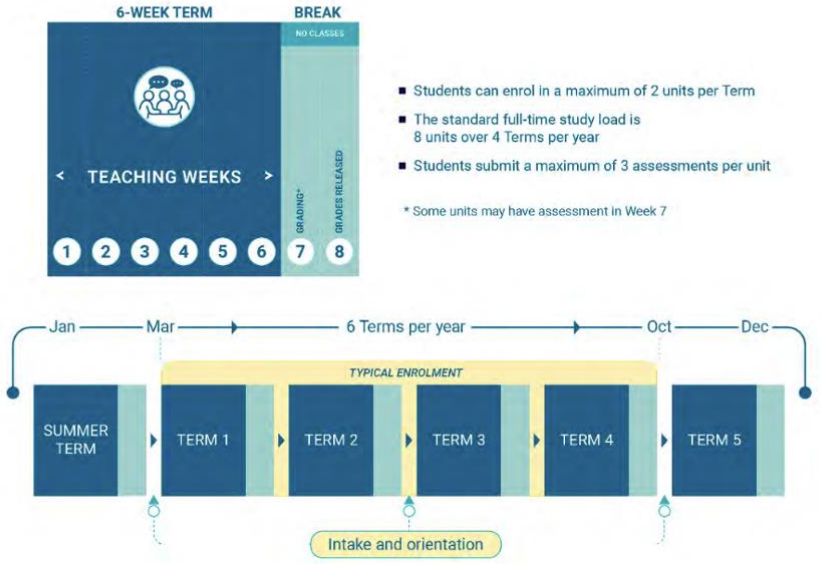
assessments. To maximize learning outcomes, feedback should be tailored to individual learning levels and clarify learning goals in a specific context. Feedback allows students and instructors to assess progress toward these goals, and this progress provides insight into how to improve performance. These advances aim to reduce the gap between students' current knowledge and their learning goals, thereby increasing the clarity, coherence, and value of the learning process. The transition to block-based learning models often requires adjustments to teaching and learning methods for both faculty and students. Depending on existing institutional conditions, this may require a profound cultural shift in how faculty organize the learning process. This includes the use of didactic concepts that promote purposeful, guided, and active learning, as well as evidence-based teaching and learning strategies.

2.Six-Week Learning Terminals: More Focus Through Engaging Blocks

A key element of the Southern Cross model is to provide students with more focus through a block schedule, an approach that reduces the number of courses taught concurrently and, consequently, the number of assessments students take at one time. The model transitions from the institution's previous trimester calendar to an academic year consisting of six 6-week semesters of instruction. As a variation on most engaging block models, the Southern Cross model offers students two credits simultaneously over a six-week period, as shown in Figure 1, rather than the typical one-credit approach illustrated by McCluskey. Visual learners typically study a maximum of two credits per semester over four consecutive semesters. Unlike traditional one-credit-at-a-time block models, students in the Southern Cross model can also study part-time, taking just one credit over a six-week period, rather than the full two-credit approach.

Figure 1

Teaching Terms in the Southern Cross Model



3.Methodology and analysis

Implementing the Northern Cross model and achieving institutional transformation and academic excellence required changes in policies, processes, and practices. The purpose of this study was to understand and share the perceptions and experiences of key stakeholders regarding change through in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five employees selected from different aspects of university management and organization. The interview team included academic and administrative leadership from the Academic Portfolio Office (APO), led by two Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs; academic leaders of faculties and colleges, such as deans of studies; Members of the Academic Council (AB), Management Department and Student Administration. Five interviewees held key leadership and management positions related to academic expertise and change processes and played an important role in the conception, implementation, and development of the Southern Cross model. Participants provided informed consent to participate in the study, and the study was approved by the University Human Research Ethics Committee.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to elicit responses and guide the discussion about the transition to the Southern Cross model.

The questions focused on four areas: change management, leadership, employee engagement, and learning opportunities:

1.Change management processes: a. What change management processes have been implemented to create the necessary conditions for the transition to the new model? b. In retrospect, were these processes effective? What could be improved? c. In retrospect, would you have implemented additional processes or teams in other organizations?

2.Control Mechanisms: a. What governance mechanisms have been implemented to create the necessary conditions for the transition to the new model? b. In retrospect, were these mechanisms effective? What could be improved? c. Looking back, would you have used similar processes or teams in other organizations?

Interviews were not conducted by participants' direct supervisors or higher-level employees. Participants had the opportunity to review and edit the transcripts prior to publication. A grounded theory approach was used to analyze the interviewees' narratives and experiences and identify key themes. Grounded theory is so called because the theory is developed and supported by the data. It is an inductive approach that seeks to find hidden themes or patterns of meaning.

Therefore, all hypotheses and conclusions relate to data and represent a dialogue between data, analysis, and theory/concept development. Themes emerged from the translations and were first coded by one researcher and then confirmed by a second researcher. These topics were discussed and researchers were given the opportunity to reflect on their positions. All disagreements were resolved by discussion until consensus was reached. In this discussion, the themes were categorized as follows. This method allowed researchers to explore individual perspectives while identifying common themes [7].

4.Results and Discussion

The interview data provided information about the experiences and perceptions of staff regarding the transition to the new model. Both teaching and non-teaching staff reflected on the change processes and aspects. Topics covered included leadership and communication, capacity development, monitoring, unequal admission requirements, and technical systems. The analysis of the interview data showed that the newly established governance structures facilitated change within the institution. The Academic Council (ACO), established in 2020, led the curriculum reform project.

It worked from the outset, together with the rector (OVC), on a comprehensive change proposal that was presented to the university community and documented the phased implementation of the model between 2021 and 2023. Respondents highlighted that a guided, active approach to learning using digital technology is a significant practical change for faculty, as they are more familiar with and rely on traditional teaching methods such as lectures and PDFs.

To enable faculty to deliver interactive content within the Southern Cross model, leadership needs to systematically manage and deliver the changes, as well as plan professional development for all faculty. As one of the Advising Directors of Educational Affairs (ADE) explained, "The discussion goes from the vice president to the faculty council and the university council talking about the changes and the current situation." The Advising Policy Office (APO) established the Academic Model Development Group, an inter-institutional community of practice to lead the implementation of cultural changes. A group of representatives from all departments, colleges and professional units, such as the Student Secretariat and the International Office, developed a new academic model based on the aforementioned pedagogical principles. Expert opinions were gathered on the literature on teaching, assessment and academic performance. The group presented its recommendations to the deans of departments and colleges, as well as to the University Council, where they were discussed, revised and approved. After initial approval, the Academic Program Development Group became the Southern Cross Model Steering Committee (SteerCo), which met weekly to exchange information on working methods and make decisions on ongoing issues. Faculty and college academic advisors (ADEs), as chairs of the Management and Academic Advisory Committees, played a central role in the academic direction and oversight of the Southern Cross Model. This group has been meeting for over three years and has moved to monthly meetings in the third year of the model's implementation. The working groups report weekly to the steering committee on deadlines, communication changes and the development of the assessment system. They have used best practices from universities using block models to develop and shape policy. This case study fills a research gap by describing the principles, guidelines, and business processes used to implement curriculum changes based on the Immersive Block model. Implementing the Southern Cross model also required adjustments in various areas, from teaching methods to assessment and review. These adjustments have been described previously. A common theme across all interviewees was that a principles and evidence-based approach to curriculum reform, as recommended in the literature, significantly facilitated a successful transition. Institutions considering such curriculum reform should first define evidence-based principles.

Second, interviewees' responses highlighted the importance of a leadership structure based on appropriate governance mechanisms. This includes, for example, policy and governance committees linked to communities of practice, bringing together a wide range of stakeholders from across the institution. This was considered a key factor in the successful development and implementation of the model.

Defining appropriate roles (e.g., business analysts, change managers, digital designers, instructional designers, and leadership positions such as the dean and provost) to guide the change process was crucial. These roles and their respective communities of practice ensured communication and promotion of the change throughout the institution and received input and support from staff. Monitoring processes were needed to report on the progress of each unit and monitor its subsequent effectiveness, for example, in terms of student success and satisfaction. Interviewees indicated that, to some extent, this will always be the case. The main conclusion was that the new academic calendar, including performance evaluation, assessment, and so on, requires a review and adaptation of policies, business processes, and technical systems to ensure they align with new trends.

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