

Navigating Professional Commitments and Postgraduate Study: Supporting Military Students in an Online Flipped Learning Course

Maria E. Burczynska

Military learners represent a very specific group within the diverse community of students. With unexpectedly changing professional commitments outside of academia ensuring inclusivity in courses designed for military students, especially part-time, is particularly challenging. Nevertheless, it is not impossible.

This paper discusses a case study of the development and delivery of a fully online, part-time postgraduate course aimed primarily at military personnel. Understanding the challenge of balancing professional commitments with part-time study, the course was designed with a strong emphasis on flexibility and inclusivity. The flipped learning approach required students to engage with course materials in advance, allowing them to actively participate in online discussions and activities.

This paper aims to critically reflect on the author's experience of designing and delivering several modules in the aforementioned course. The key challenges that were found to be particularly problematic for the module leaders and tutors included supporting military students in balancing their education and professional commitments as well as supporting them in meeting academic expectations. The article discusses a number of solutions that were implemented from the start of the course to ensure that the students' needs were met, and favourable learning conditions were created. Furthermore, it provides an assessment of how successful these were and explores adjustments that were made during the course. Reflecting on these strategies, the paper suggests improvements to enhance student engagement and academic performance in online course aimed at military learners.

Online learning has become an integral part of the Higher Education (HE) sector. In 2011, only in the United States, 89 per cent of the public colleges and universities offered online courses (Parker, Lenhart and Moore, 2011, p. 3). Online, and more generally distance, learning courses have also become increasingly popular in the United Kingdom. White *et al.* report that, in 2010, 510 out of 1,528 courses offered by 113 HE and further education institutions were conducted online (2010, p. 12). During Covid-19 pandemic there was a surge of distance learning courses across HE, and many institutions kept including hybrid and/or online courses in their portfolio long after lockdown restrictions were lifted. According to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in academic year 2023/2024, in the UK a total of 276,325 students were enrolled in distance learning courses (2025). That is including undergraduate, postgraduate taught, postgraduate research and other qualifications below the level of full degree. That number has been in slight decline over the past few years, and the UK is not an



exception here as similar trend has been observed in the US (Coffey, 2024; HESA, 2025; Mosley, 2025) nevertheless, remote learning continues to be an integral part of HE portfolio.

The definition of online learning is very broad and encompasses such terms as 'flipped', 'blended', 'active' and 'distance'. Salmon suggests that the term 'online' applies to both, an on-campus course taught predominantly in a classroom where the tutors use the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) to share teaching material such as notes or lecture slides, as well as a course where the whole teaching and learning process takes place in VLE and there is no face-to-face interaction (2011, p. x).

Flipped learning, which is the focal concept of this case study, is defined then as:

a pedagogical approach in which the conventional notion of classroom-based learning is inverted, so that students are introduced to the learning material before class, with classroom time then being used to deepen understanding through discussion with peers and problem-solving activities facilitated by teachers (Advance HE, 2017).

To various extent it is, therefore, an integral element of any type of online course because the students are expected to familiarise themselves with the available teaching material to be able to participate in either on-campus sessions taking place in blended courses, or online discussions taking place in fully online courses.

This article focuses on a case study of a postgraduate course in History and War Studies taught at a large, post-1992 institution in West Midlands. The aforementioned course was conducted entirely online and used the flipped learning approach. The students were enrolled on a part-time basis. The course's first iteration was aimed primarily at military personnel, however, subsequently it has been opened to students from non-military background as well.

This article aims to critically reflect on the author's experience of designing and delivering a number of the modules and acting as a tutor for several others in the aforementioned course. It will start with a brief review of the available literature on the subject of military students and their experience of transitioning from a military organisation into an academic one. It will then signpost the main challenges the students and the tutors are facing in both face-to-face and online settings. Next, the discussion will move to the author's personal experience and point out what was identified as problematic in the modules taught in the aforementioned postgraduate course. Two theoretical concepts will be used to explore that, namely inclusivity and andragogy. The discussion section will employ reflection on action to explore alternative solutions to the challenges flipped learning poses for part-time military students with professional commitments. Since one does not learn only by experiencing something, but by reflecting upon it (Gibbs, 1988, p. 14), by adopting the approach outlined above, the article will contribute to the existing knowledge on supporting military students in an online, flipped learning courses, and will help to improve teaching practice within professional military education (PME) in general.

Literature Review

Courses for military personnel are being developed and taught at various HE institutions across the United Kingdom and military students constitute another group among the diverse students' community. Included in this category are both individuals in active service and veterans. The focus of this case study is on the former group, and whenever it mentions military students, the group is understood as learners with professional commitments involved in active military service.

In the existing academic literature, some authors categorise military students as non-traditional learners (Ford and Vignare, 2014). They are often mature individuals returning to higher education after starting their professional career, financially independent learners with work responsibilities (in this case their military service) enrolling in part-time courses, or students caring for dependents (Choy, 2002, pp. 7-8). These attributes identify them as non-traditional learners. However, as Hockings argues, the terms 'traditional' and 'non-traditional' students should be avoided as unprecise because very often individuals may be identifying themselves with characteristics attributed to both categories (2010, pp. 2-3).

Furthermore, when it comes to pursuing further education, military students often choose part-time online courses for the same reasons as do other learners with commitments outside academia. It is because such form offers more flexibility and allows them to attend to their other duties, whether it is a job, childcare, disability, or like in this case, military service (Collins *et al.* 2014, p. 2; Gaskell, 2018, pp. 90-91). For example, as Gaskell points out, 76 per cent of the learners enrolled in Open University were in full or part-time employment during the duration of their studies (2018, p. 91).

The recurring theme in the literature available on military students and their performance at HE institutions is the transition from the military environment to an educational setting. It encompasses both, the advantages military learners may gain from their professional experience and use during their studies, as well as the challenges they may encounter. For example, it has been argued that military training enhances one's learning process at a HE institution because military students represent better self-discipline, time-management skills, maturity, and motivation than their peers identified as 'traditional' learners (Ford and Vignare, 2014, p. 9). Furthermore, the vast majority of military students bring to the course much wider and deeper knowledge of the world and different cultures gained from their experience which can significantly enhance the students' discussions and contribute to the learning of the whole group (Cate and Albright, 2014, p. 2; Starr-Glass, 2011).

On the other hand the, so characteristic for military culture, "deeply embedded norms, values and beliefs" can prove difficult in the process of transition into the HE environment (Collins *et al.*, 2014, p. 2). Besides that, the available literature identified several other challenges for the transition from military to HE environment in both, face-to-face and online formats. Some authors discuss difficulties with the adjustment to the new environment which proves to be, on one hand, much less structured or hierarchical, and on the other, much more bureaucratic than the military organisation (Ackerman, DiRamio and Mitchell, 2009; Collins *et al.*, 2014; Griffin and Gilbert, 2012). These are experienced by military students at different stages of their learning process, from enrolment to graduation. Another difficulty

military learners can potentially experience after entering a HE institution stems from their professional experience and cultural factors mentioned above as well as stereotypes associated with military personnel which affects the relations with other students (Barry, Whiteman, and MacDermid Wadsworth, 2014; Starr-Glass, 2013; Starr-Glass, 2011; Steele, Salcedo, and Coley, 2011). Equally widely discussed are the mental health issues and the challenges experienced by students dealing with service-inflicted injuries or disabilities, or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and affecting their learning process (Barry, Whiteman, and MacDermid Wadsworth, 2014; Ford and Vignare, 2014; Steele, Salcedo, and Coley, 2011). Finally, a challenge often discussed in the literature can be experienced not only by military students but by all part-time and online learners as it involves combining one's studies with other commitments (Collins *et al.*, 2014; Ford and Vignare, 2014; Steele, Salcedo, and Coley, 2011). The challenges indicated above are the ones most often covered in the subject literature, and not all of these apply to online learners in equal measure. A detailed discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this article. Instead, it will focus on supporting military students in flipped learning in balancing their education and professional commitments and meeting academic expectations.

Findings

The postgraduate course this article refers to as a case study consisted of two core and eight optional modules out of which the students were to choose four. Every module was divided into twelve teaching weeks. Every week, there was assigned reading and an online discussion. The assessment consisted of three parts – discussion contributions, a mid-term short written piece, and a final essay respectively weighing 15, 25, and 60 per cent. This section focuses on the issues the author found most challenging in her experience as a tutor. These are: supporting students in balancing their education and professional commitments and meeting academic expectations of the course. These two challenges will be explored in the context of flipped learning and referring to inclusivity and andragogy as the underlying concepts.

'Inclusivity', or 'inclusive learning and teaching', is a contested and a broad term. It is linked to such concepts as social justice, respect, equity, fairness, diversity, and widening participation (Hockings, 2010, pp. 1-4). In HE, it is used regarding a very diverse group of students with various characteristics such as age, disability, ethnicity, full-time/part-time learners, gender, language, previous educational experience, qualifications, race, religion, socio-economic background, etc. (Bamber and Jones, 2015, p. 152; Brewster, 2016, pp. 116-119; Gibson, 2016, pp. 38-39; May and Bridger, 2010, pp. 14-17). Therefore, 'inclusivity' is about considering the individual needs of the students to make sure that no one is excluded or marginalised within the group (Hockings, 2010, p. 2; Spratt and Florian, 2015, p. 90). What is important about the above statement, is that being mindful of that does not mean focusing on specific students' characteristics or groups, but rather that the inclusive approach to teaching and learning should be embedded across the HE institutions, their core functions and policies (Hockings, 2010, p. 2; May and Bridger, 2010, p. 2). Therefore, inclusivity needs to be an integral part of everyday academic practice. That is also why it should be a priority in online courses as these, because of their flexibility and availability, attract students with very diverse characteristics.

Another theory underpinning this case study is andragogy. Andragogy, in contrast to pedagogy which refers to teaching children, describes the teaching of adults. It differs from

pedagogy also in terms of assigning responsibility for one's learning and the form it takes. In the case of pedagogy that responsibility remains with the teacher. Andragogy re-organises that approach and assigns that responsibility to the student and hence aligns with the flipped learning approach. It is best illustrated in the assumptions proposed by Knowles attributing adult learners in andragogical model with following characteristics: (1) the need to know what and why should be learnt, (2) responsibility for own decisions, (3) recognition on the value of the experience, and (4) task-oriented readiness and motivation to learn and gain the knowledge necessary for further development (2012, pp. 63-67).

Juggling education and professional commitments

As mentioned above, both andragogy and inclusivity underpin the flipped learning approach used in online courses and discussed in this case study. Referring to andragogy, Starr-Glass argues the tutors must recognise and respect the fact that military students are mature learners, not only because of their age but also because of their rich experience (2014, p. 4). Very likely, the flipped learning approach will feel 'natural' for them as autonomous, or self-directed as called by Knowles (2012), learning is an integral part of the military professional culture (Mensch and Rahschulte, 2008). Therefore, the form of the course requiring a large amount of individual agency will not be a problem for them. What the tutors have to be mindful of are the other responsibilities military students have outside of academia and how they may impede the learning process.

Promoting inclusivity in online courses designed for military students is particularly challenging because of their professional commitments. Tutors need to acknowledge that military students are facing in their profession a great amount of uncertainty regarding their deployment or training exercises schedule (Starr-Glass, 2013). Sudden deployment into a remote part of the world causes severe disruption in the learning process. Such students may not be able at all to access the course and continue with their studies, or such ability may be significantly reduced, for example by limited access to the Internet or computers (Collins *et al.*, 2014, p. 4). Besides, for military students their professional commitments are non-negotiable and therefore their studies (especially on part-time basis) are given secondary priority when it comes to any changes in workload or location (Starr-Glass, 2011, p. 153). In the postgraduate course discussed in this article, several measures were undertaken aimed at minimising the negative effects of these issues. It was anticipated that the students may be deployed to a different time-zone, may be assigned additional workload, or given other unexpected assignments. Therefore, a decision was made to run online discussions asynchronously to ensure every student has an opportunity to contribute. Moreover, to offer the students even more flexibility, the organisers decided to publish all of the twelve topics at the start of the module allowing the students to review the content and plan around their schedules. While the topics are published all at once, the discussions were opened three at a time four times during the duration of the module. Furthermore, alternative forms of assignments were introduced for students, who for any reason could not submit what was required. For example, in one of the modules, the students were required to attend a certain event and write a report. If they were deployed or on an exercise, they were unable to fulfil this requirement. Anticipating such a situation, an alternative version of this assignment was designed asking them to review source material available online. The course organisers also made sure that the information on the university's relevant policies on extenuating circumstances or leave of absence was easily available.

Meeting academic expectations

Another issue to reflect on is supporting military students in meeting academic expectations set by the tutors and the HE institutions. The students often find it challenging to adapt to, on one hand, different standards expected from their work than those they were used to in military courses and, on the other hand, less structured or clear expectations varying between the tutors (Steele, Salcedo and Coley, 2011, pp. 36-37). Such lack of clarity, or absence of prescribed template, on what is expected and how to meet those expectations may significantly impede their motivation towards autonomous learning. Designing the individual modules, the course organisers were mindful of these traits and, for example, included detailed assessment briefs for all three assignments. These were outlining the objectives for the assignment as well as advice on referencing and style. To introduce some uniform structure, it was assured that all modules were organised according to the same template, so it was clear for the students what to expect and where to find the necessary information if required.

Another way the tutors can support students in meeting academic expectations is by recognising their professional experience. As already mentioned, military students possess much wider knowledge of the world or other cultures than their non-military colleagues. In the postgraduate course discussed here, the students were encouraged to share that experience (within 'official' classification), for example, in online discussions. Such practice not only enriches the learning of the whole group but also reinterpreting that knowledge and gaining new perspectives stimulates the students' individual learning (Starr-Glass, 2011). Moreover, acknowledging their experiences and recognising the students as individuals, demonstrates that that practical knowledge is equally important. That, in turn, helps to support the learners' confidence and motivation to work towards meeting the set expectations.

Discussion

As indicated in the previous section, several solutions were introduced from the start of the discussed course in an attempt to ensure inclusivity and support military students in flipped learning. Most of them proved to be working, however, as it turned out, some could have been improved.

The author was enthusiastic about adapting an exhibition approach across the whole course, where the students could review all of the contents at once and the material remained available for them for the whole duration of the module. It turned out, such an approach was only partially working as soon low participation in the discussions was noticed – especially when the deadline of the mid-term assignment was approaching. To improve that, it was considered opening all the discussions at the beginning of the module and not three at a time. The idea being that this could help the students with planning as often the discussion threads contained some additional reading or required completing an activity (as it turned out, that issue had to be addressed as well). However, that alone did not guarantee an increase in participation. Following on that, the tutors involved tried limiting the workload required for every session. At the beginning, there was no limit on the number of required weekly readings. As a result, it varied between modules (and tutors) and might have put additional strain on the students' performance and motivation. Limiting the required readings to a set

number, helped to ensure manageable goals for the students. For the tutors, however, it created another problem. Finding online available material that was concise enough to fit within the set limits and covered the subject to a satisfying extent was a struggle in some cases.

The author also found that some students struggle with meeting academic writing standards. At the start of the course, the provided guidance on requirements and expectations was deemed clear enough. After the first iteration, it turned out that the students needed much more detailed guidance. This was improved by developing further the aforementioned assessment briefs and including a suggested (though not overly prescriptive) structure for the writing tasks. This provided the students with a general template to follow and assisted them throughout the writing process. Another solution employed here was involving the writing support sessions available through the university's library. These were run both face-to-face and online therefore were easily accessible for distance learners enrolled on the course in question. During those sessions the students were offered an unbiased advice on the quality of their academic writing. The problem here was the fact that those sessions although freely available, often went 'under the radar' as the students were not aware of them. To help spread the word, the module leaders ensured that relevant information was advertised on individual modules' pages. Finally, another option that was considered were writing 'surgeries' before the assignment deadline where the students could discuss their approach with the tutor. Due to the nature of the course, these were offered in a form of web-conferences and available on a one-to-one basis. An advantage of such a solution was understandably the opportunity to give tailor-made advice. However, a disadvantage of the above suggestions was that some students could take that guidance as a guarantee for a better grade. In effect, they might experience disappointment and a loss of motivation if they receive a lower mark than expected despite following the received advice. To avoid that, the tutors had to ensure that they were making it clear that any given advice was aimed solely at pointing the student in the right direction and not reviewing their work.

Conclusions

Military learners represent a very specific group within the diverse community of students. With unexpectedly changing professional commitments outside of academia, ensuring inclusivity in flipped online courses designed for military students is particularly challenging. Nevertheless, it is not impossible. By incorporating inclusivity and andragogy from the very start of designing the course, the tutors can anticipate most of the potential challenges which could negatively affect the learning process. This way, military students can get comprehensive support in their transition to HE, especially in balancing education with other responsibilities and in meeting the academic expectations. It is crucial that in the design of a flipped online course the tutors are aiming at building a learning environment based on "empathetic understanding, rather than ... judgmental interventions" (Starr-Glass, 2014, p. 5) where the individuals and their unique qualities and needs are recognised and respected and the students can perform their best as learners.

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