"Skilful methods can achieve what power cannot": Flexible Delivery of Sanskrit at the Australian National University as a Model for Small-enrolment Languages

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Abstract

Sanskrit is better known for its antiquity and profundity than for its ability to attract undergraduates, so Sanskrit classes in Western universities have always been small. Yet as universities find themselves squeezed for funding, few can afford to offer courses that routinely attract low numbers, and many have already closed their doors to would-be Sanskrit students. At the Australian National University, however, enrolments are increasing because of our use of educational technologies to provide flexible delivery of Sanskrit teaching. With texts, audio resources and video-recorded lectures available online, and face-to-face tutorials presented through video-conferencing, Australian students can now benefit from high quality, accredited undergraduate courses in Sanskrit regardless of where they live. Two years after introducing flexible delivery, Sanskrit enrolments have doubled, students are thriving, and accountants are being held at bay. The future also looks bright, with a promise of substantial growth in enrolments nationally and even internationally. Surprisingly, the greatest obstacles to the introduction of flexible delivery have not been technological, but administrative. Through examining the experiences of lecturer and students, this paper discusses the pros and cons of flexible delivery of a small enrolment language for the university sector.

1 Introduction

In its home in India, Sanskrit has always been the language of elite scholarly and spiritual discourse, and never the language of the bazaar or the nursery. Similarly, in the West, it has never attracted the numbers of students who enrol for contemporary vernacular languages, whether European or Asian. Thus from the earliest days of Sanskrit studies in the West, student numbers have always been small. Nevertheless, universities were prepared to support, or at least tolerate, small enrolments in classical languages such as Sanskrit because they were regarded as integral to the nature of study. Indeed, one could argue that unless a university offered classical languages it could not be considered 'serious': from the early nineteenth to early twentieth century, professorial chairs in Sanskrit were established across the great universities of Europe (Sundaram, 2006) and the United States (Mann, 2007).

Sadly, such quaint notions have largely been swept away in the economic rationalist tides of recent decades. Gone are the days when many, even most, universities were prepared to employ a professor to teach Sanskrit to just a handful of students. Few Deans or Directors today are willing,

or even able, to prop up small-enrolment courses that are essentially being subsidised by other courses. The great traditional universities are not immune: as *The Times Higher Educational Supplement* reported in October 2006, "in the week that Manmohan Singh, the Indian Prime Minister, flew in to promote his country's cultural and educational links with Britain and to pick up an honorary doctorate from his *alma mater*, Cambridge University, the institution was forced to confirm that it is to abandon the teaching of Hindi and Sanskrit to undergraduates" (Baty, 2006). Fortunately, that news was slightly premature, in that learning opportunities for Sanskrit still remain at Cambridge within limited degree programs (Johnson, 2006; V. Vergiani, Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies, University of Cambridge, pers. comm., October 2009).

Yet no one would deny the continued importance and relevance of teaching classical languages in general, and of Sanskrit in particular. For people with an interest in any aspect of classical Indian culture – yoga, art, music, architecture, dance, drama or any of a range of Indic spiritual traditions –knowledge of Sanskrit is, if not essential, then certainly highly desirable. Experience at the Australian National University (ANU) in Canberra, a city of about 300,000 people, shows a small but steady demand for Sanskrit. Although the university typically attracts four to six students to first year Sanskrit annually, these numbers do not satisfy accountants. To guarantee the language's survival at this university, therefore, enrolments had to increase, but with our limited catchment area this seemed a difficult goal. Conventional advertising among undergraduates and within the broader community has never been very successful: as one of us (MT) has always maintained, there are two sorts of people in the world – those who wish to study Sanskrit, and those who do not. No known force will prevent members of the first group finding the opportunity, nor induce members of the second to make the effort. The question thus engaging hearts and minds was how to increase enrolments in a small-enrolment language within a finite catchment?

2   Distance learning, flexible learning

It is hardly surprising that distance learning should have a long and venerable history in a continent as large as Australia, whose very history has been shaped by "the tyranny of distance" (Blainey, 1966): "From the earliest provision of schooling by mail … state and federal governments have provided a sound infrastructure to support distance education [with] innovative uses of technologies to provide communication and interaction and ease the isolation of distance" (Stacey & Visser, 2005). Distance learning has thus long been an option in Australian schooling (e.g. School of the Air) and higher education (e.g. University of New England, Deakin University). Among small-enrolment languages, too, distance teaching strategies have found a place. For example, in the late 1990s, La Trobe University pioneered remote delivery to students of Hindi, nationally and internationally, including students receiving individual tuition via telephone (P. Friedlander, pers. comm., 2009).

With the widespread and rapid growth of communication technologies that make boundaries of time and space ever less relevant, the past decade particularly has seen Australian universities adopt the rhetoric of 'flexible delivery' and 'flexible learning': after scrutinising university websites and other documentation, Dekkers and Andrews (2000) defined the former as "providing approaches to education and training through a combination of different teaching/learning methods" while flexible learning was defined as "a student-oriented approach to learning, which caters for the individual needs and requirements of the learner including choice of time and place of study, and suitability to an individual's learning style."

Although educational technologies need not be the focus of flexible learning, the opportunities and capabilities of online, Internet-based learning have of course tended to dominate thinking, especially in higher education and for off-campus students (Garrett & Jokivirta, 2004, cited in Rogerson-Revell, 2007), and in language learning (Uschi, 2003). However, Singh (2003) reported that experiences with 'first generation' e-learning programs, which focused on presenting physical classroom-based instructional content over the Internet, showed that "a single mode of instructional delivery may not provide sufficient choices, engagement, social contact, relevance, and con-

text needed to facilitate successful learning and performance." Singh (2003) went on to argue that the second wave of e-learning was experimenting more with blended learning models, that is, approaches combining a variety of delivery modes. Rogerson-Revell (2007, p. 71), specifically discussing the relevance of e-learning to the learning of languages, reminded us that regardless of the capabilities of technological tools, "quality language learning environments require thoughtful planning, clear articulation of learning goals and at least a basic understanding of the principles of instructional design."

For sound historic and pedagogic reasons, the ANU still largely focuses on face-to-face teaching on its Canberra campus. Although the ANU has never placed the same emphasis on distance education as some of its institutional peers, it does promote flexible learning, very broadly defined in terms of flexibility of time, place, content and assessment. For some courses, this has meant a move away from the standard 13-week semester to block intensives. For others, it has meant developing alternatives to the traditional lecture/tutorial/essay/exam model of tertiary pedagogy and the introduction of a wide range of student-centred learning activities, often mediated through the use of educational technologies. Making the latter central to the teaching and learning process has been a third approach, in which a virtual campus is created, providing new opportunities for students unable to attend campus during regular teaching hours, if at all. By 2007, several of the University's postgraduate programs had established strong 'off-campus' cohorts (e.g. see example reported by Beckmann & Kilby, 2008), though this was not yet occurring in undergraduate teaching.

3   Sanskrit as a candidate for flexible delivery at ANU

Despite Sanskrit's long-standing importance as a classical language in tertiary institutions, there appears to be little known of the relative merits of teaching it to adult undergraduates through a communicative language approach rather than one based more on a grammar paradigm. There has of course been exploration of other aspects of Sanskrit teaching, especially in its home country of India where it is taught at all levels from primary school to postgraduate. India's Ministry of Education notes the *Report of the Sanskrit Commission 1956-57* as a significant historical moment in engaging with Sanskrit teaching (Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2005a). More recently, India's *Working Group on Languages Development and Book Promotion for Formulation of the Ninth Five Year Plan (1997-2002)* included a major section on "Development of Sanskrit and other Classical Languages" (Government of India, Ministry of Human Resource Development, 2005b). Sharma (2002) notes that the three principal methods of teaching Sanskrit have been the ancient and culturally traditional Pundit (Logical) method, which emphasised large-scale memorisation and "mastery over every linguistic detail" (p. 53); the Bhanadrakar (Adults') method, which was a systematic grammar-based approach developed in 1870, and dominant for some 60 years; and the New (Psychological) method, which "aims at making things easily comprehensible to pupils principally by adapting the teaching to their mental calibre and to their instinctive interests" (p. 58), and which appears to most closely resemble a communicative method of teaching.

At ANU, Sanskrit teaching does follow a communicative approach, with the underlying assumption being that language learning is most productive in an immersive, synchronous environment where students can develop trust in their teacher and gain support from their peers, so that the group becomes a learning community. When teachers and students all meet together at one time in one place, it is easier for students to receive direct feedback, for teachers to be sure their 'messages' are getting through, and for students to seek and receive clarification and encouragement. However, this ideal may be difficult in small enrolment languages, where the density of potential students locally may be too low to form class sizes that meet institutional baselines.

Certainly this was the situation evident in Canberra. Yet, despite the relatively low level of interest within the city itself, ANU received a small but constant flow of inquiries about Sanskrit from potential students living elsewhere in Australia. We found this reflected a latent and unmet demand for Sanskrit studies, especially among mature-aged, mid-career professionals who could

not easily attend scheduled classes. Thus, as well as the cohort of potential Sanskrit students able and willing to attend 'live' classes on-campus, it seemed there might also be a cohort willing to engage with flexible delivery modes and off-campus study. Was this a path worth ANU exploring?

Of course, many organisations and individuals already offer Sanskrit learning online (Dubey, 2007). Most of these 'courses' are in the public domain, and appear to have been established as a perceived act of 'public service' by their creators. Some of these offerings can be classified as recreational, self-paced learning activities based exclusively on online content. Among the most well known organisations providing such courses are Samskrita Bharati (http://www.samskritabharati.org/) and the American Sanskrit Institute (http://www.americansanskrit.com/).

However, while open-access online courses are available to anyone with Internet access, they have several disadvantages. Firstly, there is a great variety in their quality, vision, pedagogy and reliability. The best are highly professional, but many appear to be amateur 'labours of love' with inherent gaps and weaknesses. Few, if any, bear the imprimatur of a recognised tertiary institution, so students who complete such a course cannot claim it as credit towards a tertiary degree. Secondly, as far as we are aware, all extant online courses follow a 'study-alone' model, so their 'students' generally cannot benefit from being part of a learning community, not even an online or virtual community. (Some free online courses do advertise tutor support, but we have not attempted to validate these claims.)

There are also a few tertiary institutions, such as North Carolina State University, that offer accredited online Sanskrit courses. Most of these, however, are not in the public domain and accessible only to enrolled students, so we are unable to compare their approaches to those of ANU. Some Indian universities do offer tertiary online course that are publicly accessible, but a student would be unable to claim these courses as credit towards a degree in most Western universities. It did seem, therefore, that introducing a blended delivery model of Sanskrit teaching at ANU would meet the flexibility demands and learning needs of potential on- and off-campus student cohorts.

Blended delivery typically includes complementary synchronous and asynchronous teaching activities, such as traditional instructor-led training presented through synchronous online/video conferencing and asynchronous self-paced study of online resources (Singh, 2003). In ANU's case, synchronous interactions were imperative to ensure the creative and individualised language teaching already provided in Sanskrit, but asynchronous discussions and availability of resources online were also crucial to maximise flexibility. Blending the two also has pedagogical advantages: synchronous and asynchronous online learning activities are complementary, as each facilitates different kinds of learning, specifically 'personal participation' (interest, motivation and convergence on meaning) through the former and 'cognitive participation' (reflection and ability to process information) through the latter (Hrastinski, 2008).

Notably, engaging fully with the technological concepts of flexible learning also meant working with the concepts of adult learning, or andragogy, such as learners needing to know why they are learning; being self-directing; bringing a variety of life experiences to their learning; and having their own motivations to learn (Knowles, 1984, 1990). This required thinking through how both on- and off-campus students might best be taught in this flexible mode, with neither being disadvantaged. A student-centred focus on learning flexibility meant allowing for individual freedom of choice: thus 'off-campus' students had to be free to attend live classes if the opportunity presented, while 'on-campus' students had to be able to take full advantage of flexible options such as video-recordings.

4   Teaching Sanskrit through flexible delivery: the practicalities

Since First Semester (February) 2008, all ANU's first year Sanskrit classes have been delivered in this more flexible mode. With small classes, the distinction between lecture and tutorial is somewhat meaningless, so instead the structure is two sessions (one 2-hour and one 1-hour) synchronously-delivered each teaching week. Classes are held in a relatively new, high-technology interactive teaching space: on-campus students attend in person and off-campus students (all re-

quired to have broadband connections and a webcam) attend virtually. At this stage, it is possible, but not easy, for off-campus students to participate interactively in the on-campus classes (as discussed later).

The use of technology was designed to facilitate accessibility and flexibility. Each session is automatically video-recorded (timed to begin and end on the hour, prescheduled via crontab entries) using a standard Apple Podcast Producer configuration. With Mac Minis and Epiphan VGA-to-USB LR boxes used for capture, outputs are processed using standard podcast Producer workflows, and delivered through a Mac OSX Server built-in blog, and also directly through an Apache Webserver (a typical video-recording of a first year class can be viewed at http://lectures.anu.edu.au/ss/2009-05-25/). To maximise accessibility, a variety of file formats are used, named following strict conventions – these are audio.m4a audio only; ipod.m4v hi-res video (for Ipods on high band-width); multi-edge.3pg low-res video (suitable for mobile phone or low-band); multi-wifi.m4v medium-res (for medium bandwidth); and multi.mov hi-res (Quicktime multimedia file format). Off-campus students are thus able to choose the file format best suited to their available bandwidth to view the 'lectures' from their own homes in their own time.

In addition to watching the recorded on-campus sessions, off-campus students can also participate directly in a one-hour web-conferenced tutorial held one evening each week, conducted within a virtual classroom environment created through *Wimba Live Classroom* (http://www.wimba.com/solutions/higher-education/wimba_classroom_for_higher_education/), which functions as a plug-in within the University's Learning Management System (LMS). When the course convenor/lecturer and the off-campus students all log into *Wimba Live Classroom*, at the same time each week, all participants are able to see and speak to one another. The software detects which participant is speaking and activates that person's webcam. Students can also virtually 'raise a hand' to ask or answer questions orally, or use a message section for texting. This live online tutorial gives off-campus students the opportunity to interact in real time with both the lecturer and fellow students, so that they can comment on, or more often ask questions about, issues raised in the recorded sessions or weekly exercises. These virtual 'face-to-face' sessions, and their recordings, are not only crucial for high quality language teaching and learning, but equally importantly provide the students with a sense of belonging to a learning community: "… the quality is simply excellent. I do occasionally listen to the audio but I love the video" (off-campus student, pers. comm. 2009).

Assessment is constructively aligned with learning outcomes (informed by Biggs, 1999), with students assessed continuously throughout the semester by means of weekly exercises and four written assignments, which all involve the use of Devanagari script. Although this is now well-supported in both PC and Mac environments, students in first-year courses are required to hand-write, as the tactile, kinaesthetic experience of handwriting enriches the learning process. To submit these handwritten assessment tasks, off-campus students can scan and upload them into the LMS or send via email, or fax or post paper copies.

5   Outcomes of introducing flexible delivery

5.1   Outcomes for the university

In small enrolment languages, every student counts. Before 2008, ANU's standard on-campus program attracted five to seven students annually. In 2008, the new flexible Sanskrit program attracted eight first-year students, three on-campus and five off-campus (two from Canberra; two from Adelaide, South Australia; and one from rural New South Wales). In 2009, both first- and second-year Sanskrit courses were offered by flexible delivery, with six new off-campus first-year students (from Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane) in addition to five on-campus students. Off-campus students thus outnumbered on-campus students two to one, with a substantial increase in enrolments in one year as a result of introducing the flexible delivery and learning options (Table 1).

Mode	2008	2009	Total
Off-campus	5	10	15
On-campus	3	7	10
Total	8	17	25

Table 1: Student enrolments in flexibly-delivered undergraduate Sanskrit courses at the Australian National University 2008-2009

We also see great potential in applying the methodologies developed for Sanskrit to other small-enrolment languages at ANU. While a potential limitation could be the need for a higher proportion of spoken language tuition in non-classical languages, which would require more 'on air' tutorial time than is the case with Sanskrit, discussions are already underway with colleagues teaching Indonesian and Vietnamese. Video-recording of on-campus classes for off campus-students, introduction of web-conference tutorials and more intensive use of the LMS are all under consideration for these languages.

5.2   Outcomes for the university

In order to gauge the impact of the flexible delivery model from the student perspective, we considered achievement levels and information students had provided on their backgrounds and motivations. We also invited all off-campus students to write a reflective piece of 400-600 words on their learning experience, after one semester (for first years) and three semesters (for second years). In this, they were asked to identify problems, and to provide feedback on the course design and use of technology in general. All students responded, and the quotes we present in this paper have been extracted directly from this written feedback.

Given the small sample sizes, comparing the learning outcomes of off-campus and on-campus students is difficult. Nevertheless, we feel able to make some general observations about the two cohorts. Superficially at least, they are distinguishable by motivation and commitment. The off-campus students are, in general, a serious-minded and conscientious cohort: highly motivated, mature-aged, self-motivated learners who have actively sought out the course, and for whom en-rolment has meant a substantial commitment of time and money. For almost all, Sanskrit studies constitute a highly significant part of their lives – some because of high level engagement with yoga traditions, others because they are interested in specific aspects of Indian culture or in redis-covering cultural roots. Though they may have significant work, family or travel commitments, Sanskrit is the only study commitment for this group.

The on-campus students comprise a more diverse demographic. Some are straight out of sec-ondary school, balancing a full-time load of four courses per semester, and perhaps coping with the stresses of living away from home for the first time. A few appear to take up Sanskrit without necessarily fully realising the nature and depth of the challenge entailed in studying a complex classical language.

Given these, apparently characteristic, differences between the cohorts, we were not surprised that the off-campus students seem to achieve at a consistently higher level than their on-campus counterparts. However, we note that this is almost certainly in spite of the flexible delivery, not because of it. The 'mantra' that best explains this describes the reality of choice for the majority of our off-campus students: "live Sanskrit is better than video Sanskrit, but video Sanskrit is better than no Sanskrit". What we can state with confidence, however, is that flexible delivery does not impede a highly motivated cohort from achieving excellent learning outcomes as measured by objective assessments. Perhaps even more importantly, the flexible learning has been deemed a success by the students themselves: "Online delivery of Sanskrit works – there is no doubt about it. It is meaningful, instructive, inspirational, fun and sort of approximates classroom learning." (off-campus student, pers. comm., 2009)

6   Constraints and future concerns

What are the potential pitfalls awaiting those who would take a small enrolment language into the realms of flexible learning? Foremost, of course, are the logistical constraints common to any institution: competing interests for the highly specialised interactive-delivery theatre; failures of video-recording technology; poor bandwidth quality for students receiving videoed classes; quality of the teacher-learner contact; and opportunities for scaling up the numbers of students.

The question of scalability is especially interesting. In theory, an unlimited number of students could access the videoed materials with little or no strain on the system. The web-conferenced live tutorials are a different matter, however: the more students in a virtual classroom, the less 'air-space' is available to each student. From an educational perspective, the functional limit for a single tutorial session is about ten students: with more than that, it is doubtful whether a teacher could meaningfully address learning goals through activities such as conversation drills, chanting practice, answering students' questions, etc.

Next, the potential for some learning activities is unfortunately still constrained by the type of educational technologies available at our university. The students themselves recognise this:

> We need to move the online experience as close as possible to the classroom experience and hopefully introduce additional functionality that isn't [currently] available … [such as] … being able to sing together – not just having one voice at a time … an online white board that needs to be accessible to the students as well [as tutor] … [and] everyone's video image to be visible on the screen at the one time, like sitting in a classroom together … (off-campus student, pers. comm., 2009).

> Sometimes the audio levels are poor; or the students in the class being recorded do not speak loud enough, rendering my ability to hear and at least passively participate in the class challenging (off-campus student, pers. comm., 2009).

In this kind of teaching, assessment also provides an area of potential concern. It is difficult, if not impossible, to regulate academic honesty with off-campus students, especially without a face-to-face invigilated examination. However, any natural concern that off-campus students could submit assessment pieces that are not their own has been assuaged by our experience that these students are self-motivated learners whose primary goal is to learn Sanskrit, rather than to acquire a particular qualification or complete a particular course of study. The potential benefits, and hence likelihood, of plagiarism or other forms of academic dishonesty are thus markedly reduced.

For any largely self-paced course, individual student motivation and commitment is an important factor in completion and ultimate success, so another concern lies in the possibilities of our off-campus students giving up more easily. As one remarked, "More of the imperfection, I feel, stems from myself and the ability to press 'pause' whilst watching the lecture and satisfy myself with a distraction!" (pers. comm., 2009). Although our off-campus students are essentially 'self-starters' with a real motivation to study Sanskrit, we believe high quality educational design must remain the focus of a course that includes flexible delivery options and off-campus enrolments. In other words, the intention must be to create a genuine learning community rather than just a set of accessible learning resources.

Students' feedback has also identified other issues that need to be addressed. For example, some students are disappointed by the bond to semester timetables, which reduces flexibility by not allowing people to start when they choose, or to progress at their own pace. Other students would like more opportunities to explore aspects of Sanskrit currently excluded from the curriculum, and many simply want more time: "For a language with a spoken component … one hour per week for online classroom is not long enough" (off-campus student, pers. comm., 2009).

7   Conclusion

Back in 1981, ANU's then Professor of Asian Studies wrote that the "prospects for Sanskrit studies are not very encouraging" (de Jong, 1981). Given the still-present and continuing con-

straints on small enrolment languages in general, and the teaching of Sanskrit in particular, flexible delivery models offer exciting new opportunities for both teachers and students. At ANU, introducing a flexible delivery model to current Sanskrit undergraduate courses has been done by using online technologies to extend teaching and learning activities to off-campus students – including those outside Canberra as well as those unable to attend on campus classes during regular hours. The outcome has not only increased overall enrolments but, more importantly we believe, has also created a richer learning environment for on-campus students. Although this approach is still fairly new, the increase in enrolments has been significant enough to help ensure the survival of Sanskrit as a tertiary subject in our institution. Crucially, both on- and off-campus students are expressing high levels of satisfaction with flexible delivery as well as achieving excellent levels of learning.

There is considerable scope for further increasing the number of students we teach in this way. At present, enrolments are restricted to Australian students, but the only barriers to including international students in future cohorts are institutional, not technological. One limiting factor, for example, is the need to provide additional live online tutorials to maintain optimally-sized groups, which entails additional commitments of staff time and resources. Promoting the course, however, is not expected to be costly: using the paid advertising service (adwords.google.com) which operates in conjunction with Google searches on the word 'Sanskrit' has proved a very economical and successful means of attracting prospective students. Allowing potential students to preview the teaching resources also pays dividends: "Once I previewed the way [this] course was structured, the weekly material etc. … the care taken with everything … there was no question [but] that I would study at ANU" (off-campus student, pers. comm., 2009).

Teaching Sanskrit – a language dating back many centuries – by using technology perfected in just the past few years is, we believe, evidence of a skilful application of pedagogical and institutional energies in a case where power alone may not have saved a small-enrolment language from succumbing to external pressures.

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