DARREN BRITTEN: Thank you, everybody, for joining us, and welcome to our 6th session of this UDL Symposium online program. Closed captions are available for this session, and you can turn these on or off by using the closed captions cc button in Zoom. If you have any questions, please put those into chat and we will ask the presenter at the end of this session. And this session, Linking CONNECT and UDL to Support Postgraduate Online Learners, will be presented by Tracey Ahern. This presentation will go for approximately 15 minutes with 5 minutes for questions. And we'll throw straight over to you, Tracey.

TRACEY AHERN: Thanks very much, Darren. And thank you for the opportunity to present this afternoon. I am the Course Coordinator of Postgraduate Nursing Online courses at James Cook University, and this afternoon I am presenting my presentation, Linking CONNECT and UDL to Support Postgraduate Online Students.

To start with I'd like to acknowledge the Juru people of the Birri Gubba nation who have been caring for the lands known as Ayre where I am presenting from this afternoon for many generations. This was and always will be their land. I pay my respects to Elders past and present and extend that respect to other Aboriginal Peoples and Torres Strait Islander Peoples who are present here today.

As I said, I am the Course Coordinator of the Master of Nursing course and this is a course that has nested graduate certificate nursing and graduate diploma of nursing. It is a 100% online intensive course, in 6 study periods per year, in a carousel model. We have 3 specialisations, and the course was developed by discipline experts and designed by third party learning designers.

In terms of teaching, historically we had casual staff teaching for the first 7 years of this course, because it was a rapidly evolving course and was needing lots of support from casual teaching staff. But in 2024, this year, our permanent academics are teaching more and more, and we are also getting support from sessional staff but our permanent academics have more time with our students.

The cohort is a group of registered nurses. They are online Australia wide. Being registered nurses, they often have full time roles in very busy health care environments and, not only that, 70 per cent of them have a full-time study load. So these are very busy people. As well, it has been a variable time since study. So some of them may have just been in university or finished their university degrees only a few years ago, whereas others may not have studied for 10, 20 years. So quite diverse in that way. We have between 3 and 400 students per study period across several subjects.

In terms of the demographics, 61 per cent are female. A quarter of the cohort are low socioeconomic status people. 6 per cent are Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people; 35 per cent are first in family; 78 per cent are from regional and remote areas; and 7 per cent identify with a disability status.

In the very first years that we offered the course we started this back in 2017 and we started to realise one of the biggest challenges was that we didn't have a deep understanding of online pedagogies and best practice methods in online learning. Our staff were solely casual who required substantial support and training to address areas such as online teaching confidence and competence. And remembering, this was way before COVID, so online learning was still sort of evolving at that stage. There were lots of challenges, too, with the fast-paced intensive study modes of this course. And of course, our online teaching staff felt a little bit of isolation because they were separated from the academic environment.

For students, we saw a lack of online engagement. Many of the online teaching sessions were not well attended by students. We wanted to improve the teaching presence and connectedness in this course and improve the engagement of students, but with limited time and resources available to casual staff, this really influenced their ability to plan, prepare and deliver active online teaching sessions targeted to maximising student learning.

So we needed to find solutions to offer our students a better learning experience. Over the years we've continued to work on many elements of the course and we recognise that our course has many strengths. On this slide we recognise strengths such as the links to industry, the support of learning environment that we are able to provide, the engaging and contemporary content developed by passionate academics who work continuously to improve the quality of the course.

So at this point in time, several years after we started this course, we now know that online learning is rapidly evolving, especially since COVID, that we have online learners who are very diverse in their ability, experiences, learning preferences, cultures and backgrounds. We know also that design matters, you know that online design should be chunked, clear, well sequenced, engaging and scaffold learning directly linked to assessment. And we also believe that quality over quantity matters. Especially in these intensive block modes, we need to carefully select the content that helps the learners meet their learning needs.

We also know a lot more about our postgraduate students, and we definitely know that they are very busy and need flexible learning. They also need to feel supported and connected. And if they do feel this, they are more likely to persist in the course. They need to feel engaged and not alone. Online learning can be really isolating without the right mix of opportunities, so we want them to be really engaged, be able to collaborate with each other and learn from each other. We also know that authentic assessment for postgraduate students is really, really important. They should be able to engage in assessment that's directly related to their professional practice and be able to apply this directly to their work.

So our efforts to improve the student experience began with a body of research, which has led to the development of a framework called CONNECT. This year this was published and the link to the paper is on this slide and will be placed in the chat. For the remainder of the presentation I'll discuss the CONNECT framework and sort of highlight how this aligns to UDL principles.

So CONNECT, in its simplest form, is a framework to guide staff to build social presence and connectedness in online learning. Similarly to UDL, the purpose of underpinning teaching practice with CONNECT is to provide support for a diverse range of online learners, regardless of their personal experiences and personal characteristics. The diagram on the left shows clearly what each of the letters stand for. Going through these now: "C" stands for communication is responsive and supportive. "O" stands for optimal online presence. "N" stands for nurture, educational and professional growth. "N" stands for networking opportunities fostered. "E" stands for engaging communities of learning. "C" contemporary and authentic content. And "T", timely and effective feedback for learning.

Going over to the other side of the slide now, we can see that there is a list of guidelines within each of these letters that guides the staff to work towards being able to provide this connectedness and increase social presence in online learning. What's been really interesting is watching the staff work towards these guidelines and creating different methods depending on their own teaching preferences.

As a team, we come together to share and reflect on our teaching practices and methods used to connect, and this encourages new ideas among the team and helps us all to build our online teaching toolbox.

Noting that CONNECT, at its core, is a method of supporting a diverse range of learners, we recognised its alignment to UDL. So to explore this I did a bit of a mapping exercise. I mapped the guidelines written for each checkpoint of the three UDL principles, and this has indicated a range of areas where CONNECT has some alignment with UDL. For example, on this slide we can see the UDL principle of providing multiple means of engagement, and the arrows indicating the alignment with the CONNECT framework.

Similarly, on this slide we can see the UDL principle of multiple means of representation, and the arrows indicate the alignment with the CONNECT framework. Finally, on this slide the mapping exercise showing the alignment between providing multiple means of action and expression and the CONNECT framework.

So now let's take a step further and showcase some examples of exercises or content used in our course that demonstrate this alignment between UDL and CONNECT. This is a very busy slide, but it has lots of examples of content taken from our course to show how we can achieve options for recruiting interest, which is the first checkpoint in the UDL principle of providing multiple means of engagement.

So breaking this down, on the left-hand side we have some diagrams or images with an orange border. These are word clouds and Padlets which are used to spark interest and engage students in a community of learning. The Padlets we find are very good for allowing the students to work together, to get responses from staff and, you know, for staff to show that online presence and create a really safe and supportive space for learning.

The images in the middle of the slide with a blue border show different elements to recruit interest, such as short YouTube videos, brief lecture developed material and interactives, and these activities are contextualised to the learner's professional practice so the relevance is clearer to students. The content is offered in a sequence that has been carefully mapped by academics allowing the learner to work at a pace that suits them, taking in small chunks of information at a time.

The images on the slide with a purple border show how variety is used to recruit interest for the visual learners in the cohort. As shown here, they have hotspots embedded so that students can click on the hotspots and read or learn more information. Finally, the images with a pink border show a range of different interactive exercises to entice participation, such as surveys, evaluations and matching exercises. These types of exercises allow students to participate but also to get some feedback on their learning.

On the next slide we've got some examples to show how we can sustain effort and persistence. On the left-hand side with the orange border we have an evolving case study which prompts and scaffolds students through a task. To complete this task, students have previously worked through a range of content and readings and resources to develop some learning around the task or to help them with the task. In this example, students were asked to provide their first thoughts on a case scenario, and then they can reveal their peers' responses. So if I click here and zoom in, you can see that if they click this button here, their peers' responses appear, and they can read those and develop learning from each other, that community of learning.

As they step through the exercise, the students are asked to then read a research paper to deepen their understanding of the topic. Then the task asks for their second thoughts. So they are building this learning all the way through the task. They continue all through the 8 steps before coming to an action point which has been informed by their knowledge of the scenarios, as well as building their knowledge through reading the research and their peer responses and participating in the activity.

Once students complete the exercise, they listen to audio feedback from their instructor about the task. The pictures with the blue border are examples of other tasks used. The first is a series of steps to guide thinking through a concept. The second is a knowledge check. The examples with the purple border show ways that our staff connect with students in live teaching sessions or through video content developed and sign posted throughout the content. The final example, of course, is Padlet which we've found a valuable tool for helping students to remain engaged and helping them to get some feedback from their staff.

We use a variety of methods to foster collaboration, and this increases opportunity for the students and staff to connect. Here we have got examples of announcements, discussion boards, teaching sessions and Padlets, and fostering collaboration and community is central to the CONNECT framework. We know that from the literature when students feel connected to their peers and the staff, they have an increased sense of belonging and are more likely to persist in their studies.

On this slide we can see that there is alignment between the CONNECT framework and the way that we increase mastery orientated feedback. We have worked with the intention to help staff to increase staff knowledge around effective feedback for learning. So you can see there is a diagram on the left which shows the sort of training that we have provided to our staff around effective feedback for learning.

We use Padlets to provide students with formative feedback and our staff actively respond in all Padlets to students so that they get that formative feedback on their learning. We also encourage staff to leave meaningful responses to students in the discussion boards, and that's the other diagram that's there.

This year our permanent academic staff have been beginning to underpin their teaching with the CONNECT framework. What we've noticed is that we are receiving some very positive feedback from the students. And we can see that their learning experience has been enhanced through this intentional use of the CONNECT framework to underpin our practice.

So on the slide we can see some examples of student feedback. The first is around scaffolded learning and assessment. The student said, "I enjoyed how all assessments lead into one another. The online classes were both thought provoking and extremely valuable in getting a deeper understanding." The next one in the blue box is around staff support, "There was a great level of support in this subject. The lecturer was very approachable and encouraging and committed to making this an enjoyable subject." Lastly in the orange, "The staff presence. I love the weekly video and assessment briefings. These made me feel like there was someone there to help when I needed. It was less isolated than I thought online learning would be."

So I'd like to finish my presentation today and ask you if you have any questions for me. Also if you do want any more information about the CONNECT or any of those exercises that you saw on the slides, or heard about, then you can email me at tracey.ahern@jcu.edu.au. Thanks, Darren.

DARREN: Thank you, Tracey. Lots of food for thought there, and certainly getting UDL into that postgraduate space, as you said you've got some very connected learners who are very, I don't like the term "time poor", but have lots of conflicting priorities that are there. So getting those multiple means in there I think is crucial. We have got time for a couple of quick questions before we go to the break. Ray commented, "Love the use of the CONNECT pneumonic". I can never say that word properly. I wonder if this has taken off with other teams?

TRACEY: It hasn't yet because we are sort of, we just published it and we are sort of doing the rounds at a few conferences, this one and the Stars conference as well. Trying to get the word out about the CONNECT framework, but also, you know, planning some work within our own discipline and college and university to get the word out about the CONNECT framework.

DARREN: There was a question as well in regards to the tool that was used in one of those ones you highlighted where students could put in their response and view other peer responses. Was that a specific tool that was used for that?

TRACEY: So our learning designers do use specific learning design methods to make these tools. So that was the concept that was created by one of our academics, who is working really closely in subjects to do with research, and trying to break down the whole, you know, research to help students to understand more easily, I guess. Not always do postgraduate students in nursing want to learn about research, so just trying to break it down into small steps and help them think through those things. So that was conceptualised by her but then created by a learning designer.

DARREN: Custom stuff at its best. Just quickly, because I will let people run for the break, et cetera. What plans do you have for exploring and using this CONNECT in your practice?

TRACEY: Well, we are starting to underpin our team is underpinning this in their practice, but we are working on a small research project, a pilot study to build a microcredential as a training package, which staff can work through to understand more about and unpack the CONNECT model or framework. And then we are going to do some research to see if this makes a difference in practice among the students and staff experience.

DARREN: Yep, fantastic. Look, we are over time. But we'll leave it there. Thank you very much for your presentation, Tracey.

TRACEY: Thank you.

DARREN: Thank you everybody and join me in thanking Tracey for a really good thought-provoking session.