Reflections on online teaching and learning

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Abstract

At the School of Law, University of New England, approximately 80% of students enrolled in law units are studying in the external or 'off campus' mode. Increasing use is being made of computer technology to try and bridge the distance between students and between the university. This paper will draw on the author's experience of online teaching to argue that online learning can be a useful tool, but it does not suit all students, teachers or subjects. The rush to online teaching must be matched with sufficient resources and a commitment to incorporate online learning activities as an essential part of, rather than addition to, the unit.

Introduction

The School of Law at UNE took its first students in 1993 and I began teaching there in 1994. The University is the second oldest University in New South Wales and has been teaching by distance education since 1955. We claim to be '… Australia's most experienced institution in distance education'.[1] Today the majority of students are external or off campus students.[2] This is true across the University and in the School of Law where about 80% of our students study externally.

In recent years we have seen an increased use of computers and the web to enhance our teaching. In this paper, in what is I grant a rather unscientific approach[3] I want to reflect on the value of online teaching as part of the distance educators' toolbox.

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[1]   UNE, 2002, 'History of the University of New England', *University of New England*, <http://www.une.edu.au/unehist.htm>, 15 April 2003.

[2]   UNE, 2003, 'UNE Facts and Figures' *Planning and Institutional Research*, <http://planning.une.edu.au/Statistics/fact_fig/index.htm>, 15 April 2003.

[3]   If I was a rocket scientist, the rocket would fall over!

I think I may have some useful observations to make because of some relevant experience, in particular:

- In the past few years I have both taught, and studied, online;

- At UNE we are not using online teaching to merely supplement or replace face to face teaching or seeking to enhance the flexible nature of our programs. Most of the literature on online learning discusses the advantages of online learning compared to what is described as traditional teaching, [4] by which they mean a number of students sitting in a room being lectured at by their teacher. For institutions such as UNE there is a long tradition of Distance Education so we are not seeking to replace or improve on face to face teaching, rather we are looking to replace or improve our distance, print based, teaching. Even at its worst, distance education allows students to study at a time of their own choosing and to study in locations remote from the university. At its best, print based teaching materials can be fine exemplars of resource and/or problem based learning, with learning exercises and assessment that encourages active learning. The mere fact that the material is in print does not mean that it is not flexible any more than the fact that it is online will mean that it is flexible. Increased flexibility for students may be a legitimate expectation of moving teaching online, but for institutions already well experienced with flexible distance education, there may need to be more advantages than simply flexibility. My experience at UNE may give me some insight into what, if anything, those advantages are.

- Very little of the literature (if any) deals with the teaching of law. Much of the literature and discussion on online learning focuses on school education and trade qualifications. There are various publications dealing with some University courses, but these seem often to relate to teachers in education schools, where clearly exposing people to online learning will have significant

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[4] See for example Johnstone, S., 1999, 'Introducing and supporting change towards more flexible teaching approaches', in Tait, A. and Mills, R. (eds), *The Convergence of Distance and Conventional Education,* Routledge studies in distance education, Routledge, London, 39-50; Lairson, T.D., 1999, 'Rethinking the "course" in an online world', *Campus Wide Information Systems,* vol. 16, no. 5, pp. 186-189; Mazoué, J.G., 1999, 'The essentials of effective online instruction', *Campus Wide Information Systems,* vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 104-110 and Webb, J.P., 2001, 'Technology: a tool for the learning environment', *Campus Wide Information Systems,* vol. 18, no. 2, pp. 73-78.

benefits if what you are trying to do is teach them about online learning! There is little discussion of law schools and one thing that I think distinguishes the study of law from may other disciplines is the laws focus on the written word. We still expect students and lawyers to read and to enter the discourse of law by engaging with what judges' and writers are saying. It is not the case (at least not at UNE) that we want students to analyse their workplace or where there are processes to be learned that can be better described with animation than with words. Law is still written in the judgments, legislation and commentary, and delivery of words is easy with computers, but it may not be necessary. As a law teacher I hope that I may add a perspective that suits our experiences perhaps better than the literature that is available.

- Finally, I have received the Vice Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, once on my own account and once as part of a teaching team that taught a unit with a significant online component. I am perceived by colleagues, rightly I think, as a keen adopter of the technology, but my enthusiasm has become somewhat dampened by taking time to reflect on my teaching and learning experiences, and so it is that reflection that I seek to share today.

Having tried to justify why I wish to stand before you and as I say, deliberately share some personal, rather than well researched reflections on online learning, I will now set out to explore what I see as the role of online teaching and learning in a modern law school

What is online learning?

One definition of online learning is:

> … the appropriate application of the Internet, and Internet technologies, to support the delivery and management of learning skills, and knowledge.[5]

The key to this definition, and what distinguishes online learning from online delivery is the use of the word 'appropriate'. Simply taking a study guide, or recording a

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[5] Henry, P., 2001, 'Online learning technology, content and services', *Education + Training,* vol. 43, no. 4, pp. 249-255, 250.

lecture and placing it on the web is an add-on model of online learning.[6]   I would prefer to call this 'online' or 'e' delivery rather than 'online learning'.[7]   This is 'online' but it really adds little to the student learning. What is required for 'online learning' is a redeveloped course to take advantage of the various possible advantages that are offered by online learning.

What is required for effective online teaching and learning is commitment. The National Centre for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER) have identified that '… flexibility, the responsive teacher and the quality of materials and course design – are absolutely vital to effective online teaching.'[8]

What are the advantages of online learning?

The literature suggests some common ideas that represent the teaching and learning advantages of online teaching. 'Online learning' can provide increased flexibility for students. The online environment allows students to access the virtual classroom from anywhere in the world, at anytime that suits them.   Students can choose when to log in, and can, with an appropriately structured unit, decide how and when they will study the various topics or themes within the unit. As I've indicated above however, that can also be done with good print based distance education materials.

The electronic environment can be used to facilitate learning by taking advantage of the communications opportunities presented by the online environment in particular e-mail and the use of synchronous (real time, such as 'chat rooms') and asynchronous (eg bulletin board) communication tools, as well as the relative ease with which students (not just lecturers) can post material to the web.   A recent survey of

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[6]   Richards, C., 2002, 'Distance Education, On-Campus Learning, and Online learning Convergences: An Australian Exploration', *International Journal on Online learning*, July-September 2002, pp. 30-39.

[7]   E-delivery may, of course have some advantages over traditional print based distance education materials, one particular advantage being that materials can be easily updated. Teaching and learning resources can be developed as the course progresses and incorporate recent changes in the subject matter under discussion as well as respond to student needs and concerns. With the constant release of publications via the web, this is particularly useful. E-delivery allows developments to be incorporated into a course as they happen, rather than having to wait until the course is next offered.

[8]   NCVER, *What makes for good online learning* (2002), 1. <<http://www.ncvre.edu.au/online>>

undergraduate students at UNE however, found that 45% of the students found that these chat facilities were not useful aids to their learning.[9]

With the development of the World Wide Web and, even more importantly in the university context, the virtual library (where students can access, via a Web interface commercial publications such as Emerald Full Text, Butterworths Lexis/Nexis, Expanded Academic etc) the online environment allows students to locate refereed and/or authoritative publications and so do their own, self directed research, again from anywhere in the world at any time that suits them. Teaching students how to communicate and research in the online environment is a necessary part of equipping them with the skills that are increasingly common-place in the world where they will work (irrespective of what work they do).[10] This use of the online environment can free us, and the students, from reliance on printed materials or even text and case books. We can now expect students, no mater where they are, to find and read primary materials and to use various research tools that all university libraries are now providing.

What are the costs of online learning?

As with anything, there are costs with online learning. Some are financial such as the costs to institutions and students to invest in the necessary technology, computers, Internet access etc. Some are opportunity costs, eg the time that is taken learning to use the technology, time that could be spent on other educational activities, research or leisure. Some are emotional such as the frustration we have all felt when computers and Internet access just does not function as we expect it to. Here the survey of students at UNE students found that 62% of students responding to the survey identified negative aspects of online learning, including issues of cost and difficulties with Internet connections.[11]

There are also educational costs. On oft claimed advantage of online learning is the opportunity for group work and collaboration but this can in fact decrease flexibility. If there is no synchronisation of student work, ie no co-ordination of deadlines etc,

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[9]   Centre for Higher Education Management and Policy, *Online Learning at the University of New England: Survey of Undergraduate Students 2002*, UNE, Armidale, March 2003.

[10]   UNE, 1998, 'Attributes of a UNE Graduate', *UNE Office of the Secretariat*, < http://www.une.edu.au/offsect/une_grad_attributes.htm> (15 April 2003).

[11]   Above, n. 7.

then flexibility is enhanced as students can progress through the course at their own pace, then there can be little group activity as the timelines of the individuals may not match up with others in the group. Increased synchronisation (requiring students to log on at particular times or to meet deadlines) can increase the group work but decrease the flexibility in delivery.[12]

Another way in which online learning can decrease flexibility is that it may be used to force students to adopt a single learning approach. The course designer, reflecting his or her beliefs about teaching and learning, may require students to log on, to join a nominated or self-selected group and produce some sort of group outcome. But such activity may be contrary to the learning preferences and strategies of a particular student who may well prefer to work on their own and feel that individual work suits their learning preference, their balance of study with other commitments, or their objectives in undertaking the study at all.[13]

There are also costs for academic staff. Apart from the set-up costs and costs involved in learning how to use the various software packages there is a very real time cost. Anyone who thinks online learning will save them time is very much mistaken. It is this author's practice to spend the start of every day responding to e-mails and the various online sites that are maintained for the courses I teach. This can easily take up to two hours each morning. With 80% of our students off campus, I don't mind that time, it is a reasonably efficient use of the time. If we think how much time is spent devoted to preparing and delivering face to face classes for on campus students, two hours a day teaching time to the off campus students is not misplaced. There is no doubt however, that online teaching does add to, and not reduce, the time spent on teaching and therefore detracts from time for other academic pursuits.

Weighing up the costs v the benefits.

If there are costs and benefits associated with online learning, it follows that these need to be balanced to determine whether we should require students to take part in online learning activities, or simply offer online learning opportunities to those

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[12]   McFadzean, E. and McKenzie, J., 2001, 'Facilitating virtual learning groups; a practical approach', *Journal of Management Development,* vol. 20, no. 6, pp. 470-494.

[13]   McLoughlin, C., 1999, 'The implications of the research on learning styles for the design of instructional material' *Australian Journal of Educational Technology,* vol. 15, no. 3, pp. 222-241. <http://www.ascilite.org.au/ajet/ajet15/mcloughlin.html> accessed 7 March 2003

students that desire them, or believe that they will benefit from them. Only if the advantages clearly outweigh the costs should students be required, as opposed to be given the option, to take part in online learning.

Some rough data
What the students do:

One way to look at the value of online learning is to look at some results to try to answer the question 'Did taking part in online learning improve the students results?'

In 2002 I taught (with a colleague) a unit with 375 students. Of these 136 (or 36.3%) were 'internal' students, and 239 (or 63.7%) were 'external' students.[14] The unit was successfully delivered using a printed study guide, an audio-cassette on assessment techniques and a text written specifically for the course.[15] These materials were supplement by regular face-to-face teaching for internal students, a 2 day face-to-face residential school for external students and the provision of online learning resources using WebCT (which included synchronous and asynchronus discussions and links to intranet and WWW resources). We took the view that the printed course materials and text formed the 'core' of the unit, and everything else was supplementary, offered on a smorgasbord basis, students could pick and chose what they wanted. Internal students were not required to attend classes, externals were not required to attend the residential school or log onto the web site. The success of the unit was reflected in the award, in 2003, of the Vice Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching to the unit's teaching team.

The question today is what impact did the online component have? The data that we have available is the result data and data taken from the WebCT bulletin board. We can identify who contributed to the bulletin board and how often. We cannot now identify who may have visited the web site and read postings without contributing, who may have used the 'synchronous' chat facilities (either in private discussions or formal online tutorials) or who used the various links and resources that were provided via the site.

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[14]   The phrases 'internal' and 'external' are in inverted commas as we tried not to distinguish in our practice. Students could come to class if they could, but were not required to, and all students had access to the online learning web site (conducted using WebCT) if they wanted to.

[15]   Eburn, M. and Hayes, R, *Criminal Law and Procedure in New South Wales* (2002).

Notwithstanding these (very great) limitations, the data shows that 26.1% of the total student body made at least one posting to the bulletin board; 12.5% made 5 or more postings and 7.7% made 12 or more postings. The table below shows the results in percentages (but note that they do not add to 100 as they do not include students who did not complete the course, ie who received the result of 'Fail Incomplete' or who withdrew from the unit at any stage).

Result	All students	All external students	At least one posting	5 or more postings	12 or more postings
Fail	3.5%	2.5%	1.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Pass	26.1%	23.8%	17.3%	17.6%	13.3%
Credit	29.9%	28%	33.7%	35.3%	33.3%
Distinction	24%	26.8%	31.6%	35.3%	43.3%
High Distinction	2.1%	1.3%	6.1%	7.8%	10%

This data does not control for a number of variables, in particular students who contribute more to the bulletin board may have been more motivated, had more time to spend on their studies and/or had less external commitments than other students. 22.4% of these students also attended a residential school and 13.3% were 'internal' so at least could have attended classes on campus during the semester. Clearly we hope that students' results are influenced by these face-to-face learning activities (or else we would not provide them).

Accepting, but putting to one side, these limitations it appears that even making one posting to the bulletin board[16] meant that the percent of Fail/Pass grades fell (29.6% of all students and 26.3% of all external students either passed or failed, but only 19.1% of students that made at least one posting passed or failed.) The percentage of higher grades increased (from 56% (all) and 54.3% (external) to 71.4% respectively). There was some slight increase on this figure (but probably not enough to be significant) where there were 5 or more postings. There appears to have been a significant improvement in results, in particular Distinction and High Distinction grades where there were 12 or more postings (26.1% for all students and 28.1% for all external students compared with 53.3% for students with 12 or more postings).

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[16]   Which demonstrates that the student could access the web site and so also had access to, and are likely to have at least looked at some of the other resources that were provided.

100% of the external students who received a High Distinction made 12 or more postings to the web site.[17]

Whether their contribution to the bulletin board 'caused' these results, or is indicative or more scholarly, well organised, motivated students, is something that cannot be answered here, but it does suggest that there is at least some link between online learning activities and high results, but no clear conclusion can be drawn here with this data.

What the students say

What the students think of online learning can at least in part be drawn from the survey of UNE undergraduates. Rated as least useful was the use of 'chat' or real time discussion facilities (44.7% rated these as not useful). Most useful was the presence of student grades (84.4%). The presence of student grades may be 'useful' in providing quick feedback but is unlikely to add much in the way of flexible or self directed learning. Other very useful features were the presence of lecture notes (78.8%), bulletin board (69.4%), past exam papers (68.4%), unit information (67.8%), and web links (67.6%). It is interesting to note however that much of this data can be provided in alternative forms, ie lecture notes, past exam papers and unit information can and probably should be included in printed study material. What students saw as value in the bulletin board is open to conjecture. If they found asynchronous discussions, ie student postings discussing the subject matter as valuable, then that would reflect the theoretical view that online learning can help build a community of learners by facilitating communication. If, on the other hand, the bulletin board was seen as valuable because it was an opportunity for the lecturer to post 'words of wisdom' on the subject matter, then that is not enhancing flexible learning but it might be meeting student demand for constant reassurance that they are doing the right thing.

Another source of data on what students say comes to me from a survey I undertook of students who studied '*Criminal Law and Procedure*' in 2001. In that year we delivered what was effectively a web site via CD-Rom as well as having an online web site and traditional print materials. Students were asked to rate their preferences

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[17]   60% of all internal High Distinction students made at least one posting to the bulletin board.

for the delivery of teaching materials between printed materials, the WWW and CD-Rom. What the results showed, in my view, was an appreciation of the value of a variety of media, but a clear preference for traditional, written study material.[18]

Reflections

I understand that my data is rather unsound, I'm no statistician and one could drive several buses in the gap between the data and any possible conclusions, hence I refer to this next section as reflections.

Reflecting as an online teacher.

Prima facie, however, there is some evidence that taking part in online learning activities does lead to better student outcomes, when comparing the students with the entire student body (which includes both on internal and external students) or simply with 'external' students. Whether their participation in the online component was 'a' cause of this improved results, or whether 'better' students simply take advantage of all that is offered but would do 'better' anyway cannot be determined, but it does suggest that there is room for further exploration of this link.

Notwithstanding the limited (and it is only limited) apparent benefit of online learning, many students can successfully complete a unit without recourse to the online component. For many students we can imagine that online access was difficult or impossible, didn't suit their lifestyle or learning needs or was otherwise undesirable. Some of them may have benefited had they taken part in the online learning activities or used the e-resources that were provided, but equally some would not have been able to undertake a course that they successfully completed had they been required to undertake online learning activities. Already many students fail to complete a unit and withdraw or receive the grade 'fail incomplete'. It is likely that this number would be higher were online learning compulsory.

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[18] The figures for first, second and third preferences are shown below:

	1st preference	2nd preference	3rd preference
CD-Rom	40.0	40.0	10.0
WWW	2.5	25.0	60.0
Print	52.5	20.0	17.5

As a teacher, however, there are aspects of online teaching that I really enjoy, and that is, in particular, the opportunity to interact with many more students than is otherwise possible in the traditional distance mode of sending out print materials and receiving back some assessment tasks for marking. One can really get to form personal relationships with students that I know enhances the teaching experience and I'm sure enhances the learning experience. As a teacher I see that the online environment allows students to develop a relationship with me and I with them, rather than a relationship inter students.

Reflecting as an online learner

Some online learning experiences are simply trivial. This is my experience as an online learner, where logging on one is overwhelmed by the number of postings discussing trivia. Although online communication can help bridge the communication gap, it cannot at this stage replicate the sorts of coffee room discussions that contribute to learning. The discussions are too slow, too disjointed and simply do not have the dynamics of real time, real person communications.

It is too easy for online work to become 'busy' work. Students report and I experienced this, that one can log on, read the bulletin board, check the updates etc, spend 1 to ½ hours on this and feel very satisfied that one has done the required 'study time' and then realise that you have not actually engaged with any solid, sound, academic material. The use of online time detracts from what might be expected of students and this seems particularly problematic in law for external students, who could well spend that time trying to come to grips with a judgment rather than a myriad of short, ineffective postings.

Conclusions

Online learning covers a myriad of activities, and deciding which if any should be an essential or compulsory part of the unit will depend on what is being taught and why. As a person who has both taught and studied online, there are clear tasks for which online activities are incredibly useful. If there is some collaborative learning exercise that is required, the use of online media opens up that opportunity for external students. The use of the online environment to allow students in our discipline to access primary materials is a clear advantage. Care has to be taken however to make

sure that if online learning is to become an essential part of the course, the question of why it is to be used and how it is to be used must be clearly thought out, else we are just creating 'busywork' for both us and our students.

Clearly the research to establish the benefit of online learning needs to be more rigorous and more controlled than a simple analysis of results data after the event. On this evidence however, one would have to conclude that online learning is a valuable resource that will benefit many students: it may help some students do better, it may help the best students to excel. There is not, however sufficient evidence, either in the literature or in the limited data here, to conclude however, that it is essential to successful performance in a course of study. This leads to the conclusion that, except where teaching about online learning or e-activities is in fact a desired learning outcome, online learning should be seen as one way to reach the desired learning outcomes and should be made available to the students that want it, but it should not, at this stage, been seen as either essential or compulsory.

We must be careful, those who enjoy the technology and who have access via a university to high speed web access, not to lose sight of the needs and wants of our students and leave them behind in the rush to embrace online teaching and learning. The web has much promise, but the possibility of fully online education remains some way off. At the moment however, it is a valuable addition to the tool box, but it is not yet time to throw out the tools that we have become familiar with in the past.

Michael Eburn
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