

Slogging It Out With Students

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Abstract

Online education has allowed Higher Education facilities to teach large numbers of students in varied disciplines across the world. But in the fast-moving world of online education, students often feel they have lost their individuality and crave connection with a human face. Teachers who are new to online education can also experience the virtual environment as a cold and unrewarding space.

Our Case Study, 'Slogging it Out with Students', considers the ANU Legal Workshop Graduate Certificate in Migration Law and Practice, a program taught by legal professionals rather than traditional academics.

Our Case Study considers the techniques the ANU College of Law Legal Workshop is using to assist practitioners in a young and developing profession to adopt teaching strategies that will transform the faceless online environment into a dynamic, enriching experience for all participants.

It discusses our use of student and teacher feedback to structure improvements to program content and delivery, and investigates the potential to build a community of practice through online teaching and learning.

Our experiences confirm the well-documented differences between online and face-to-face teaching, and the need to equip online teachers with new skills in teaching design and implementation. These experiences may assist other providers achieve best practice teaching in the digital world.

Context

The migration advice profession is relatively young. Registration for agents was introduced in 1992 and subsequent legislative changes have seen professional entry requirements evolve into a Graduate Certificate delivered by four universities specified by legislation.¹

The Australian National University (ANU) has delivered the Graduate Certificate in Australian Migration Law and Practice since 2006. From an initial intake of 100 students per year, student numbers have increased to over 400 enrolments per annum.

The ANU program is taught in both intensive and online mode by a large team of practicing professional migration agents and immigration lawyers. There are approximately thirty three teachers on staff. Of these, two have academic expertise and all have either lectured occasionally or provided professional development tutorials within their professions (both as lawyers and agents). Because our teachers live and practice all around Australia, they themselves primarily meet in a virtual, online staffroom.

The program is made up of four subjects. Two subjects are co-requisites and each iteration runs for eight weeks. As a result subjects run in four sessions with two programs completed each year.

The program was designed in 2006 by the flexible learning unit (FLU) at the ANU College of Law Legal Workshop. The FLU ensured that best practice online curriculum components such as discussion forums, reflective journal activities and Capstone assessments were incorporated into the program design

Unlike the traditional method of teaching at the College of Law, lecturers do not retain control of the course curriculum, assessment or method of delivery. Instead, lecturers within the program adopt a specific role for each iteration. Each subject within the program has one convenor to manage the subject and a team of four teachers.

Discussion forums were established as the 'classroom' for online students where problem based activities introduced within the subject content were 'discussed' on a weekly basis. Teachers loaded the problem-based activities onto the discussion forum and students were to provide solutions during their own time.

As the student intake increased so did the number of teachers working in the program. The corporate knowledge regarding the utility of these curriculum tools was not effectively transferred to the individual teachers. Student and teacher feedback during 2007 and early 2008 made it clear that improvements to our teaching practices could better engage teachers and students in the world of online learning.

¹ S289A Migration Act 1958 determines that an applicant must not be registered as an agent unless the Migration Agents Registration Authority is satisfied they have completed a prescribed course, the course is determined in a Ministerial Instrument as the Graduate Certificate in Migration Law and Practice taught at Australian National University, Murdoch University, Victorian University and Griffith University.

From Practitioners to Teachers

In early 2008 our teachers took part in an internal survey² of their approach to teaching and their understanding of learning amongst their students.

Their responses revealed that most teachers relied on an apprenticeship model of teaching: as practitioners our teachers felt a strong need to impart knowledge through examples of their own experience in the field of migration law. They felt that the most effective way to help students build their own future professional careers was to enliven necessary law and theory with real, practical examples of applied knowledge.

Simultaneously, our teachers felt constrained by the mode of teaching we use. They felt that they could only successfully implement the apprenticeship model and share their personal experiences in a real classroom rather than the online environment. Although our teachers could see a theoretical relationship between a real classroom and a discussion forum, they still felt they needed additional advice about how to teach in that arena.

For those who saw their role as didactic experts imparting knowledge and experience, the concept of reflective journals and capstones held little meaning.

Teacher feedback³ raised further concerns that a seeming lack of student participation in the online environment was partially a result of their own lack of training in online teaching. They doubted their own efficacy because to their minds, inadequate numbers of students were responding to discussion forum activities, and those who did respond were often simply cutting and pasting large amounts of legislation rather than actually discussing the allotted topics.

Teachers tended to blame poor student participation on the actual content of the discussion forum and our own subsequent review of forum content did reveal a need to revise the way that discussion forum activities were phrased. In addition, the growing number of students online resulted in a situation where the first few students answered the 'question' leaving nothing to do for those who checked into the forum a little late.

As a result of this feedback we began a series of changes to the program:

- Incorporating a substantial element of online teaching instruction for teachers in each teacher Review Day (regular days when we assemble all the teachers in Canberra)⁴
- Reviewing the content, style and management of discussion forums

² Teachers volunteered to take part in a series of interviews discussing their view on teaching and learning.

³ In addition to the survey, and informal feedback, the migration program holds two 'Review Days' per year to discuss the program, investigate new ideas, systems and structures and promote relationships amongst the teachers. These days allow teachers to engage in frank discussion and provide feedback on the program.

⁴ July 2009, instruction by ANU College of Law Visitor, Dominique-Alain Jan, Professor of Technology, Haute Ecole Pédagogique, Lausanne, Switzerland

We introduced teachers to the concept of ‘scaffolding’ online discussions (Salmon 2000) to facilitate the social interactions that can result in information exchange, knowledge construction and development.

We reduced the number of weekly discussion forum activities and amended them to ensure they had an easily identifiable purpose, with the potential to encourage real debate rather than simply prompt ‘answers’ which could be found directly in the law.

We reduced the size of discussion forum groups and asked teachers to ensure that each discussion included an introduction that described the meaning and goal of the activity for students. Each week, we reminded teachers of the steps they could follow with their students to encourage interaction and debate: acknowledging; ‘weaving’; questioning; clarifying; focusing and closing discussions.

The results of these changes are encouraging rather than definitive. Teacher feedback confirms that those who adopted Gilly Salmon’s approach found that students were less reliant on them and more likely to interact with each other. Teachers found that a smaller number of better crafted discussion forum activities improved the quality of student participation and that smaller discussion forums created an environment where it was easier for students to participate.

From User ID’s to Students

We regularly seek student feedback about program delivery, content, and the overall experience of studying the Graduate Certificate in Migration Law. Alongside praise for the program, the mode of study, individual teachers and the availability of resources, we observed a thread, amongst some students, of concern that there was a disconnection in their interactions and a desire to hear a ‘human voice’.

‘The early subjects I did made me feel like I was all alone typing into a computer and I wasn’t even sure what I typed was being read’

‘I believe we could use skype or messenger to be able to see and talk with convenor or for tutorial purposes’

‘I recommend during online courses in each subject should be 1 session face to face’

‘I noticed a lack of community, contacts in the profession are very important’

‘Communication between teacher and student, my course is online there should be better and more interaction between student and teacher’⁵.

Although we had begun to address teaching techniques for online discussion and introduced our practitioners to the teaching skills they needed to encourage and facilitate online learning, this student feedback showed that we were still grappling with issues raised by Walker in 1997 when he said *‘They desire, I believe, an expression of their identity as a student that can only be realised through some form of relationship with us as teachers. They can only learn if they know somebody is there’.*

⁵ Comments from student ANUSET survey responses during 2007 and 2008.

It seemed that our structural changes to discussion forums had encouraged a more student centered learning environment promoting debate and the creation of online relationships, but the changes had not enabled teachers to truly 'meet' their students.

From Students to Individuals

The concept of deep, reflective learning had been embedded within our program from the outset. However our teacher/practitioners had no prior experience with these learning tools and could not relate to their place within the program.

Reflective journal activities in each subject culminated in an assessable capstone review. Because we found that both teachers and students were struggling with the idea of reflection, the notion of a journal, and the final, assessable, capstone, we moved through several iterations of refining our program descriptions of these items and the tasks associated with them.

We 'rebranded' the reflective journal in terminology more relevant for today's students. From digital natives to digital immigrants, the majority of us have more experience with the concept of blogging than that of keeping a journal or diary. By rebranding the reflective journal as a Student Log - a SLOG - a purposefully humorous acronym that emulates the acronym BLOG - we were better able to explain to students exactly how we wanted them to record and reflect on their learning experiences.

We encouraged students to maintain their SLOG in a format that suited them - a diary, a notebook, even an online BLOG. We linked the capstone review directly to their SLOG entries, reminding them throughout the program that maintaining their SLOG would make this final, difficult, assessment piece easier to accomplish.

Students were asked to complete a weekly SLOG entry and to submit the first entry in the first week of the subject and the final entry in the last week of the subject. The activities asked students to focus on their feelings and goals entering the subject and their reflections on their achievements at the end of each subject. SLOG activities were not assessable, but teachers were asked to provide feedback to students.

What we did not expect is that these measures to improve understanding of two fundamental teaching and assessment tools, the reflective journal and capstone review, would have a substantive impact on students' sense of connectedness with their teachers.

Student response was overwhelming, with the majority of students submitting journal activities that were deeply personal and revealing in both weeks, reflecting their desire to have a voice within the program, and their pleasure at finding a space which gave them that voice.

Example Student 1

It's 11 pm already!!! I've been panic for whole day today and busy with login to WebCT, ISIS, Legal Workshop homepage and ANU student email continuously and click the links here and there.... But I'm really lost and don't know what to do first. Actually this is the first time for me to study online and moreover I haven't been back to formal education for over 20 years!!!

Western teaching and studying approaches nowadays are so different from what we had in China in 1980s. (Well, I myself am much different from what I was). Course outlines, resources, lecturers, classmates and assignments are all online! Even the bookshop for my prescribed texts is online and it has no branch in Melbourne.

I'm gonna calm down whatsoever. Step by step:

- a) *Purchase the prescribed texts online*
- b) *Set up automatic forward for ANU emails to my hotmail address*
- c) *Print all essential reading resources (computer kills my poor eyes!!!)*
- d) *Interact with lecturers and fellow students on discussion forum*
- e) *Finally keep my fingers crossed and hope tomorrow will be much better*

Example Student 2

I am very excited to start my studies after 21 years. After going through the process in the first week, I am feeling confident that with the help of the teacher and co-operation of other student I will be able to continue this course successfully.

One of my friends is already in this profession and during several discussions I was inspired to study this course and after successfully completing this course, I would like to start my own private practice as a Migration Agent.

Example Student 3

- *I am studying migration law because I have a share in a company that practicing migration agent.*
- *I want to be master in this migration law so that I do not depend on my partner who is a registered migration agent. If she leaves my company, I'll be bankrupt like a law firm without a lawyer.*

I want to help as many as young skills Vietnamese to come to Australia to live and together we are building up this country to become a strong nation .My concerns regarding this course are:

- *Before, I have always found LAW is a dark subject with me because when first arrived in Australia 1984, my English was not good enough to study LAW that why I took Engineering course instead. This course is quite intensive, I am afraid that I do not have enough time to study but I'll try my best.*
- *This is a first time I am doing distance learning and have found a bit struggle with this kind of study but I'll see.*

These responses created both an informal survey of the issues that drove students to undertake the program and an insight into student's attitudes, study methods and private life. In effect they created an introduction to the individual. At this point, teacher feedback on these SLOGs could have established a dialogue that went beyond assessment.

Those teachers who did take the time to read and provide feedback on the SLOGs were pleasantly surprised by the insights they gained into the motivation and life experience of their students.

Unfortunately the majority of teachers did not respond well to the notion of offering feedback on a non-assessable task, and failed to incorporate feedback into their teaching schedules. These teachers seemed to struggle with idea of providing personal feedback on a task that was not 'measurable' in any traditional way.

This was distressing as we saw a lost opportunity for teachers and students to make a vital connection at the beginning and end of their time together.

In an effort to make the SLOG more 'teacher friendly' by reducing what was seen as 'additional work', we have since rolled the two SLOG tasks into assessments.

Whilst students are assured of feedback and a mark, our initial assessment of the change has been that the formalisation of the SLOG in this way appears to have diminished the personal nature of the contributions and lost the opportunity for an important connection between student and teacher.

Towards a Community of Practice

It would seem best at this point to consider the concept of 'community' within education and professional life. A community is a social construct, a place that is defined in the imagination of those who claim to belong (Anderson 1991). The concept of a national community espoused by Anderson, that consists of people who have never met but nevertheless are connected; is easily transferable to other communities be they social, professional or educational.

Instrumental to the development of an online community in professional education are two models. Like Anderson's imagined community which is defined by its 'fraternity; a deep horizontal comradeship' these community models include social connection in their specific defining features. Garrison Anderson and Archer (2000) developed a conceptual model of a 'community of inquiry' involving three components of presence. The first is a *cognitive presence* determined to be an environment that supports the growth of critical thinking skills; the second a *social presence* - a supportive environment allowing communication and collaboration amongst students; and the third a *teaching presence* which defines parameters and focuses interactions in a specific direction.

Lave and Wenger (1991) formulated the concept of a community of practice which comprises three elements: a shared *domain* of interest; a *community* where members interact and learn together; and an ability to share methods for solving problems and working in a specific area of *practice*.

The fact that teachers in the ANU Migration Law program are specialist practitioners provides the opportunity for our students to engage on the periphery of a community of practice. The usual experience for students who graduate from university is to move into the professional world that no longer involves their academic teachers. In our case, graduates will join a small profession (with roughly 4,000 practitioners Australia wide) that includes every teacher they have interacted with during their studies.

We believe we are on the verge of establishing a community of practice that will enable graduate students to move from this periphery of participation into their new professional life.

However the power to connect lies in the individuals involved. Unless teachers and students can form some level of personal relationship with each other there is little chance of approaching the community of practice that is so desirable because it 'acts as a living curriculum for the apprentice' (Wenger, 2006).

The Lingering Question

In our quest to capture an opportunity to create a community of practice amongst our graduate migration agents we have a sense that sociology and pedagogy have collided in the digital environment. Sociologists observe the phenomenon of social networking, interpret what they perceive is taking place and may even seek to define it, but they don't set out to construct it.

We do not doubt that communities need a common purpose and a social space to communicate, connect and create comradeship. We can see that Digital Natives need minimal structure, guidance or intervention to network with each other. Give them a forum like Facebook or Twitter and they will create and find interactions that are meaningful to them.

Educational design in the online world seeks to construct the environment that will encourage similarly meaningful interactions. What we have detected in our own program is that it is too easy for practitioner teachers and educational designers who have observed the phenomenon of social networking to translate this into a belief that it is the digital tools such as online journals, or the digital spaces such as discussion forums which will engage their students and create relationships.

Despite using these tools and creating these spaces our own experience suggests the opposite. Without the personal touch of the teacher, students can feel isolated, even within their chat rooms and discussion forums. Isolated students who do not feel that their presence is acknowledged are unlikely to participate. In turn, this lack of participation can discourage the teachers themselves.

Time and again our teachers have asked, 'Why is it all such a hard SLOG?'

Conclusion

In fact, it is our view that the role of the teacher is paramount online. It has become clear that if we want to foster a more complex community such as a community of practice that extends beyond the 'staff room' and embraces students on the verge of entering professional life, we ourselves need to adopt a version of Gilly Salmon's scaffolding approach with our practitioner teachers. (Wenger, 1996).⁶

We need to continuously interact with our teachers, assisting them with the techniques that can transform their online teaching into an experience that more closely resembles the face-to-face teaching they themselves find more rewarding. We need to ensure that tasks we ask them to undertake have meaning.

It is not enough to simply provide an environment that fosters critical thinking. It is not enough to impart the knowledge that is needed to practice in a critical area of Australian law. It is certainly not enough to just apply the pedagogy that describes how to engender online environments that will stimulate communication, collaboration and shared problem solving.

ANU's Centre for Educational and Academic Methods (CEDAM), which supports communities of practice amongst academics at ANU, has identified effective trust as the prerequisite for establishing a community of practice. Trust cannot be established in a vacuum, the social dimension of trust requires a relationship to real or imagined others (Weber, 2002).

If our goal is to provide a dynamic and enriching experience for teachers and students, an experience that reaches beyond the program into the professional arena, we must equip our teachers with the digital skills to enable them to 'meet' their apprentices, to reveal the individual students behind the user ID numbers, and to establish the socially trusting relationships that can later emerge as a community of practice amongst Australian migration agents.

No matter how elegant the digital environments and tools we create, if the teacher remains a didactic instructor, we will be forever slogging it out with students.

⁶ Wenger acknowledges that design alone will not create or maintain a learning community, Participations must be facilitated and the community supported.

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