

Peebles and Gobbets...Online Problem-Based Learning in Law

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Abstract

This paper describes how two teaching methods have been employed to enhance and direct online learning as an alternative to classroom seminar discussions.

A series of problem-based learning scenarios were introduced as a substitute for tutor-led face-to-face classroom seminars on 'healthcare law and ethics'. The scenarios contained ethical dilemmas, many of which could be solved by a number of alternative means. Student responses, therefore, were not 'right' or 'wrong' in the traditional sense but a variety of responses could be seen as appropriate, given that a supportive ethical framework or argument was presented.

The transition from classroom to online learning was designed to replicate the learning activity as closely as possible. The benefits were intended to include flexibility for student participation and a longer reflective discussion period to foster critical thinking and encourage dialogue. Classroom discussions were generally constrained by time limitations and were frequently cut short; the limited time available for feedback was also seen as a weakness for the classroom exercise.

Participation was high and student motivation to marshal thoughts or prepare independently researched notes was clearly evident. The tutor played a passive role and was infrequently involved to answer questions or generally monitor discussions. Substantive questions were generally rephrased or clarified to ensure that the group addressed the problem without significant tutor assistance.

Groups varied substantially with their responses – a mixture of unanimous, majority, minority and singular views were often expressed. Differences between groups were also seen, although to a less extent: frequently each group would be representative of the entire seminar cohort. Anecdotal feedback suggested that the students enjoyed the experience and gained a deeper understanding of the topics through advanced preparation and the ensuing discussion. Full student evaluation was conducted to evaluate the project on completion.

Alterations were also made to formalise group feedback and facilitate inter-group communications. A nominated weekly reviewer was appointed in advance to summarise the group discussion in the form of a gobbet. As group discussion took place within a private, asynchronous message board available only to the group members, the weekly summaries were posted to a separate message board. These gobbets were made available to the entire cohort, and permitted individuals to make responses.

The aims were encourage greater student participation and co-operation in a class where many students had been extremely reluctant to offer an opinion or to challenge each other's views. Written communications appeared to create a more thoughtful discussion and reduce confrontations when discussing controversial topics. Placing students in random groups encouraged 'mutual learning', giving each student the chance to introduce their ideas among peers in a non-threatening environment. Following the precepts set out in Kolb's learning cycle, the students were given the opportunity to reflect on their own group's findings in light of the other group's feedback and comments. By confronting all sides of the debate and examining sources which may or may not support their own reading the students will have also hopefully brought about a transformation in their existing knowledge; a goal of constructivist learning.