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The Role of the Internet in the LLB: Some Lessons from Adelaide

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Introduction

The internet as a teaching tool is viewed by many as the way forward, the new light in education. Those of us using the internet in the education process are, however, often operating in the dark. Whilst the internet may well be described as a new frontier offering many opportunities for diversity and flexibility in education it is equally valid to describe it as a tool offering many pitfalls and dangers to the unwary and the uninitiated.

Adelaide University Law School introduced the internet into as a component of the teaching and learning program in 1999. The approach has been a co-ordinated one with the underlying aim of expanding student experiences. The opportunities presented to students have included participation in interactive on-line tutorials, delivery of materials on-line and the opening of additional lines of communication via the internet. There have been many lessons learnt along the way with student responses ranging along the spectrum from outright hostility through lethargy to wholesale embracing of the opportunities which new technologies have to offer.

This paper is a practical one - the focus is on the experiences here at Adelaide and the valuable lessons we have learnt. Whilst much of what is said may well appear to be self evident the reality is that we are often so focussed on processes that we can miss the obvious and overlook simple solutions. The aim of this paper is to share the valuable (and at times painful) lessons learnt through our experiences and in doing so shed some light on the frustrating and rewarding process of incorporating the internet into the teaching program. 1

Adelaide Approach

If the lessons learnt at Adelaide are to be illustrative, it is important to place them in context. The initial approach to online learning was an *ad hoc* one – simply meeting needs as they arose. At first there was the creation of a rudimentary Web site and basic communication via email. This created few ripples on the surface of the academic conduct of the school – the first major wave was the creation and introduction of the “ALICE”² Tutorials, ‘wonderland’ had come to the Law School – and with it came confusion, some lost opportunities and some hard lessons.

ALICE

ALICE is the Adelaide Law School Intranet for Collaborative Education and is an interactive and collaborative tutorial system designed with a central focus on student learning processes and the benefits of interaction and collaboration. The system is sessional in design with students being required to progress through a series of sessions focussing on a set of questions whilst considering and polishing their responses. The ALICE program was designed to address some of the perceived shortcomings of the existing tutorial/seminar system at the same time as broadening and enhancing the learning environment experienced by students. The design of the program focussed on adding value to the learning experience with the overarching aim of engaging students in the learning process itself rather than focussing on being told the 'correct' answer.

Each ALICE tutorial consists of a series of stages through which a student must progress. During Session 1 they are on their own, they read the question and respond as they see fit,³ once a student is satisfied that they have answered all of the questions, they click on 'session end' and move forward. Upon completion of Session 1 students are placed in a virtual queue where they wait to be assigned to a 'Tutorial Group'. This group will consist of at least 3 other students and an individual who has completed Session 1 will wait in the queue until either 3 other students enter the queue or 24 hours has passed – whichever comes first.

Once a student moves into Session 2 they have access to the answers of the other students in their small group. At this point we invite them to submit comments/questions to the 'Common Room' (a Discussion Board) or email the other students. The aim is to encourage collaboration and discussion and to this end, the actual quality of the answers is neither monitored nor commented upon.⁴

The tutorial system was developed in partnership with Computing Science. There were three distinct stages to the development process:

1. Three month feasibility study (completed April 1997),
2. Software trial and development stage, and
3. Initial introduction into some core subjects.

An important component of the development process was the conduct of a controlled trial of the system in two core subjects⁵ which resulted in some positive student feedback with students being supportive of the idea that they were 'forced' to participate as opposed to being able to sit back and observe (as is sometimes the case in traditional face to face modes of teaching). There was some concern regarding the role of the ALICE tutorial with students involved in the trial emphasising a fear that the electronic tutorial would usurp the traditional teacher and therefore undermine the quality of their education. Whilst this was clearly never the intention of the ALICE system, it was a real issue for the students (and to a lesser extent staff members) and was unfortunately never directly addressed during the implementation phase.

Web Sites

The initial foray into the world of electronic publishing saw the introduction of a basic Web site presenting information about the Law School, the staff, research interests and course details. The potential of an internet presence was recognised and gradually a Law Library site, focussing on research and student needs was developed and implemented and the Law

School site was redesigned. There was no overall design strategy employed and the Law School site became a clearing house for a wide variety of information as diverse as the provision of basic course materials through to information for prospective students. This has recently been identified as an ineffective approach and the course materials have been moved to the Blackboard course platform and the Law School site has had its third major facelift.

Course Materials

The course materials were, until recently, simply placed either on the Law School Web site or on the secure University 'Adelaide On-Line' site. There was no consistency with some staff preferring the security of a password protected site whilst others were happy to place materials on the open Web site – in some cases different staff members in the same course would place materials in different locations. There was no standard approach it really was a case of hit and miss. There is now a more co-ordinated approach with all materials being made available via the Blackboard course publishing platform. This provides for an overall course design and presentation, consistency in approach across the school as well as a secure site to protect individual intellectual property in courseware.

Communication

Effective communication is an essential ingredient of any teaching and learning program. Current Adelaide Law School policy is that all information is disseminated electronically. Announcements are sent out via email and posted on an electronic noticeboard and course specific announcement pages⁶ and Discussion Boards. The aim is to ensure that all important information is sent to students in a timely fashion. Students have gradually come to accept this mode of communication and part of the daily routine is to check their email and notice boards – if they are unable to do this from outside of the school they tend to come in early for scheduled classes and visit one of the computer suites. This has eased the pressure on the general office staff which was created by constant repetitions of the same questions at the same time as enabling students to keep up to date with general course information.

Key Lessons

Plan

The importance of a detailed plan cannot be overstated. This should involve more than consideration of the development and basic introduction stage – it is essential that the plan extend through to every level of the implementation and review process. The introduction of the ALICE program stands as practical demonstration of the problems that can occur if even the smallest detail is overlooked.

The development stage was meticulous in its attention to detail – alternatives were explored, trials conducted and feedback sought. A robust system based on sound pedagogical principles was developed and ready for launch. ALICE was introduced into the core curriculum during semester 1 1999⁸ with the level of participation reflecting the level of integration into the conduct of the course⁹. In the initial stage there was no structured framework or support system – neither staff nor students were provided with any guidance or introduction to the system. It became evident that this oversight was having a negative impact on the conduct of the program and introductory workshops were conducted in week 7. This was after 2 tutorials and student resistance to the concept was already well entrenched with only 10% opting to attend these tutorials. There was clear suspicion about the system and the students resented

the lack of information – ALICE became ‘The Phantom ALICE’ of the Law Revue.

The source of the problem was identified and steps taken to rectify it: a staff member was placed adjacent to the main student computing suite, a User Guide was written and distributed and a new Web site including advice and regular updates was designed and implemented. In many cases however the damage had been done and students involved in the initial stages of ALICE continue to resist and resent its inclusion in any course. This assertion is supported by the Survey which divided student responses into two separate groups – those who were at the School prior to 2000 and those who have come since then. The aim of this separation was to determine the effect of the more co-ordinated approach and to gain a clearer picture of the educational value of the ALICE program without the data being coloured by the negative impact of the oversights of the implementation process.

There were three key questions relating directly to ALICE and its acceptance which clearly demonstrate the damage which can be done if a program is introduced in an ad hoc as opposed to a co-ordinated manner. The first question of relevance was:

“Did you find ALICE Useful?”

The respondents were given four options:

1. Not useful at all,
2. Of limited use,
3. Useful, and
4. Very Useful

Once again the students who were exposed to the confusion of the implementation phase were more negative in their response and tended to want to avoid ALICE if possible.¹⁰

Inform

When creating a plan for the introduction of the internet into the education program, a fundamental requirement is to inform and educate both staff and students. This process must include identification not only of the potential and advantages offered by inclusion of the new media, but also of the purpose and aim of its introduction. If there is any suspicion concerning the motivation (there may for example be a misplaced belief that the introduction of the internet will reduce contact time, shift the learning burden from the teachers to the students or reflect a move by school hierarchy to dictate teaching methodologies), the entire program can be compromised.

Staff

The internet as an educational tool represents a new frontier to faculty members and the big question is not only are they willing to cross this frontier but do they have the necessary skills and knowledge to do so. The reality is that the introduction of new technology into the curriculum is not an easy decision, quite often staff are simply lacking in the relevant knowledge, information and understanding of the effect of web based tools.¹¹ If a school decides to pursue the development of such tools then staff support and education must be

considered.

At the Adelaide Law School the acceptance of the internet as a valid teaching tool has been quite slow and this is despite the appointment of an Electronic Resources Specialist¹². Staff are often quite happy with the manner in which their courses are run and are concerned about the cost/benefit ratio of the effort required to introduce the internet into their teaching. It is the responsibility of those with the understanding and knowledge to support and encourage those who have not. The success of existing programs must be widely publicized along with the student comments regarding their experiences. It is imperative that teachers are not only shown how the internet can add value to their current teaching practices but must also be given the opportunity and assistance required to develop the relevant knowledge and skills.

It has been argued that the role of the teacher fundamentally changes when interacting with students via the internet. No longer are they to be the font of all knowledge - rather they become a monitor or mentor.¹³ Such a view is, however, ignoring the fact that many teachers already use innovative teaching methods and are actively seeking new ways to engage students. At the Adelaide Law School for example 34% of the courses offered in 2001 had no lecturing component with the focus being on smaller more interactive groups. Teachers of Law are moving away from the role of 'giver of knowledge' and are now encouraging students to seek information for themselves and actively engage in the learning process. The next step is to encourage and support them in the shift to on-line learning and demonstrate that it is consistent with the current approach.

There is no quick or easy solution regarding either the training of staff or the introduction of the internet.¹⁴ The key to is to build on existing skills at the same time as providing incentives and rewards for those who take the time and effort to be innovative in their course design and conduct.¹⁵ The shift in focus in the learning environments is essentially a cultural change which cannot happen overnight, neither can it happen without providing staff with the requisite support and encouragement.

The early days of ALICE saw some justifiable staff concerns. There was no general dissemination of information or training provided. ALICE was simply a tool made available for staff to use as (and if) they wished. The take up and interest levels were, as a result, lacking. Once a co-ordinated approach and training program was devised and implemented and support provided the general level of acceptance rose. Early in 2000 training sessions were offered to interested staff members and the opportunities and possibilities of the ALICE system clearly outlined along with clarification regarding the support available to them. Staff acceptance and support of the system rose and the ALICE tutorials are now an accepted teaching tool.¹⁶

Students

The introduction of the internet into legal education is designed to add value to the learning experience of students - however not all students are receptive to this improvement. There is a neat divide in attitude with some students welcoming the innovation and others actively despising it. If technology is to become an effective teaching and learning partner then the perception and attitudes of students must be addressed.

At the negative end of the scale there are the technophobes - students who are afraid of trying anything new and who believe that the internet (indeed anything to do with computers) is beyond them. These students need to be assisted - care must be taken in the early stages of

any course in which the internet is used. If necessary extra seminars in a computer suite need to be scheduled. This fear needs to be recognised and respected. The negative impact of failing to address these issues is clearly demonstrated in the experience at Adelaide – the students exposed to the early, less organised introduction of the program continue to actively resist it.

There are also those students who simply do not like change. They perceive anything new as an additional burden and an attempt by staff to force them into doing more work. It is an imposition and they claim that they cannot see any benefit in the introduction of technology into their learning. Once again this needs to be addressed head on, students must be made aware of the benefits of accessing materials or participating on-line. They need to be reassured that this is a positive step, that it can empower them as active learners¹⁷ and that it is not all part of a devious plot to overwork them. The internet as a learning tool needs to be sold to the skeptics.

The reality is that whilst trainers are interested in shifting the learning focus to a more learner centered approach it can often be at odds with what the students want.¹⁸ Some students will always seek the soft option, they will sit back in seminars and lectures waiting to 'take it all in' if they are forced to participate they will resent it. This problem is not one that is limited to on-line learning it is a reality in all learning institutions at all levels. The introduction of active learning via the internet can help to combat this and may move towards teaching these kinds of students how to learn.

At the other end of the spectrum are those students who are keen to engage in on-line learning. The demographic of the University population is changing, no longer are students mostly limited to those fresh out of school. Increasingly students are over 25 and are attending part time whilst others are subject to economic pressures and are working as well as studying.¹⁹ Both of these groups are seeking flexibility in their learning and appreciate the opportunity to access course materials and participate as their individual schedule dictates. They are able to reinforce their face to face learning whilst being able to meet other commitments.

Evolution not Revolution

The natural resistance to change means that an overnight revolution is not going to happen. Initially ALICE was subject to active resistance by students, it was something new which could mean more work or effort for little gain. Gradually however this attitude has faded – students have come to accept that it is a valid teaching and learning tool. The flexibility of the system appeals – some students progress through the tutorials concurrent completing one each week, others simply work on those tutorials dealing with subject areas requiring clarification whilst a third group simply leaves all of the tutorials until the end of the semester and completes them as a part of their course revision.²⁰ The key is patience – the innovation must be made available to the students, its benefits emphasised and if possible, it should be voluntary in the first instance.

The Law School is moving towards making all materials available electronically. In order to gauge student response to the possibility of making materials exclusively electronic a trial was conducted during second semester this year. The plan was for all course materials for Corporate Law to be made available on-line, there were to be no hard copies at all. Within the first few days it became apparent that such a revolution was not popular – students were vocal in their condemnation of the approach with reactions ranging from concern through to hostility. By week 5 it was decided that the materials should be available both on-line and in

hard copy. Once the alternative was available and students were comfortable in the knowledge that they were not being forced into change the complaints fell away. Many students continued to access the materials electronically and over time it may well be that the majority of materials are accessed in this way. To be successful the change must be gradual – a cultural change such as this needs to evolve so that the change is gradually accepted by both students and staff rather than being imposed upon them.

Some final thoughts

Introducing the internet into the teaching and learning program is not a simple matter. It must be approached in a strategic manner – whilst it may well be that the on-line learning has the capacity to add value to the experiences of both staff and students, it is a change that cannot take place overnight. Each stage of the process must be carefully planned and implemented. The interests of all participants must be taken into account and addressed. Simple mistakes and oversights can easily cloud any innovation turning a potential learning boon into a nightmare.

The potential of the internet as a learning tool has not yet been fully tapped. If this is to occur then the key lessons from Adelaide must be followed:

Plan

Inform

Avoid the temptation to be a revolutionary

and above all: have fun with it!!

Endnotes

[1] Throughout this paper, any reference to “the Survey” will be to a survey of all Law Students conducted at the beginning of 2001. The stated aim of the survey was to: ascertain the current level of student acceptance and perception of the use of on-line learning facilities and their integration into the Law program. The responses of participants serve to provide some valuable insight into the impact of the internet on the learning experience of individual students.

[2] Adelaide Law School Intranet for Collaborative Education

[3] The questions are of varying style and can be discussion/opinion questions, problem questions, interpretative questions...the style is limited only by the imagination of the one drafting the question.

[4] There is however constant checking of the transcripts to ensure that the students are entering substantive answers rather than a selection of letters or other ‘amusing’ comments in order to gain access to the Teacher’s response. If a student does behave inappropriately their progress will be reset and they will be called in to speak to an ALICE staff member and the aims and objectives of the system will be clarified.

[5] Australian Constitutional Law and Contract Law

[6] via the Blackboard course platform

The internet is now firmly entrenched in the conduct of daily business at the Law School. Students and staff are prepared to accept the integral role of electronic resources on many levels – from basic sharing of information through to an integral component of the teaching program. Acceptance is not however universal, neither has it been an overnight revolution. The integration of the internet into the conduct of the LLB amounts to a cultural change and should be viewed as a process rather than an innovation which can occur overnight. The remainder of this paper will focus on the key lessons learnt at Adelaide and consider some alternative approaches that may have eased the process. 7

[7] The aim of this paper is to describe experiences and outline lessons learnt as such there will be no in depth analysis, merely a presentation of ideas and thoughts.

[8] Was introduced into 4 subjects: Legal Skills I, Criminal Law/Law of Crime, Property Law and Intellectual Property)

[9] In Criminal Law/Law of Crime for example ALICE was actively promoted by the academic staff and was integrated into the conduct of the course – participation levels were quite high. In direct contrast – Property Law simply allowed ALICE tutorials to be available to students – perhaps for revision or to clarify subject areas of the course. The actual tutorials did not reflect course content, neither was it supported or promoted by the academic staff – participation levels were low.

Of those students who were at the school in the early stages of implementation 75% found ALICE to be of limited or no use as opposed to the more junior students with only 32% falling into these two categories. The other two questions of relevance were:

[1] “My learning has been enhanced by ALICE”, and

[2] “I would like to have the chance to use ALICE in more subjects”

[10] This aim of this paper is to provide a general overview therefore an in depth consideration of the survey results will not be provided. I am happy to discuss the survey findings in general (email: bernadette.richards@adelaide.edu.au) and there will be a more thorough consideration of the survey and its implications in a forthcoming *Legal Education Review*.

[11] Curtis J. Bonk, Jack A. Cuumungs, Norika Hara, Robert B. Fischer and Sun Myung Lee, "A Ten Level Continuum for Higher Education" in Beverly Abbey (ed) **Instructional and Cognitive Impacts of Web Based Education**, IDEA Group Publishing, Hershey, 2000 p56

[12] The position of Electronic Resources Specialist (Law) was a joint Library/Law School appointment established at the beginning of 1999 as a component of the ALICE Project.

[13] Fisher, "Implementation Considerations for Instructional Design of Web-based Learning Environments", p71 and Linda Harasim "Shift Happens: Online Education as a New Paradigm in Learning" 3(1) **The Internet of Higher Education** 41-61, 2001 p51

[14] S. Ryan, B.Scott, H.Freeman and D.Patel **The Virtual University: The Internet and Resource Based Learning**, Kogan Page, London, 2000, p28

15 Winship, J. Australian Vice Chancellors-Committee, "Exploiting Information Technology in Higher Education: An Issues Paper",
<http://www.arcc.edu.au/news/public_statements/publications> 1996, para 177

[16] ALICE was a component of three courses during semester 1 2001 and four during semester 2.

[17] Winship, "Exploiting Information Technology in Higher Education: An Issues Paper", para 177

[18] Fisher, "Implementation Considerations for Instructional Design of Web-based Learning Environments", p 80

19 Winship, "Exploiting Information Technology in Higher Education: An Issues Paper", paras 20 and 99

[20] This is of course subject to individual course requirements with some staff electing to include ALICE participation as a component of the participation mark.

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