

Developing an online learning community in Industrial Law

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In the past decade, theoretical frameworks for designing online learning communities have continued to evolve. These frameworks can provide an engaging and dynamic learning experience for online students. In the current Higher Education climate, current teaching approaches need to adapt to changing student demographics to retain student engagement. At the University of New England, a unit Industrial Law has been redeveloped as a scaffolded and activity focused online learning experience with off-campus students. The aim of this approach was to achieve a collaborative learning environment that encouraged critical thinking and communication. This paper reflects on the frameworks of online learning communities in practice, specifically relating to the instructional design process underpinning the development of online learning communities.

Keywords: online learning communities, learning design, peer assessment, collaboration

Introduction

Hammond (2014) provides a critical perspective on the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), which are publicized as the answer to contemporary learning issues, and facilitators of change in education. As such, often the use of ICT for education is poorly planned and not engaging for students in the digital era (Kirschner & van Merriënboer, 2013). Contrastingly, Yuan and Kim (2014) argue that when the design of learning is embedded in learning outcomes and alignment of learning tasks and assessments, online learning communities can be established. Such learning environments focus on the student learning potential (Ryle & Cumming, 2007), rather than use of technology.

A new learning design approach was created and trialled in Industrial Law in 2013, aiming to build a dynamic and collaborative online learning community. Extensive time was spent in the instructional design stage of the unit, to ensure that a collaborative online environment could be achieved. This paper outlines the approach that was designed for Industrial Law students in the context of designing for dynamic online learning communities and explains how the unit was evaluated.

Online learning communities

Yuan and Kim (2014) describe online learning communities as including members with a distinct sense of belonging. Many factors assist in the creation of these communities including idea sharing, a sense of mutual trust and respect as well as 'shared values and beliefs' (Yuan & Kim, 2014). Various factors to consider in the instructional design process is nurturing and supporting a sense of community through various assessments, and practices, and a sense of social presence (Kofman & Senge, 1993). Similarly, (Ryman, Hardham, Richardson, & Ross, 2010) describe how learning communities can encourage critical discourse and strong leadership between peers.

One of the benefits of online learning communities is online structures can be used to enhance student collaboration and interaction (Yuan & Kim, 2014). This occurs by fostering and encouraging an interdependent relationship between the members of the online community (Ryman et al., 2010). For example, in Industrial Law at University, peer assessment was utilised to build collaborative relationships between students. Another benefit of effective learning communities is this can assist individual students in achieving what they cannot by themselves, with the help of other students (Maddix, 2013). Lastly, online learning communities is they can reduce isolation of distance education students (Ke & Hoadley, 2009).

Industrial Law at university

Trimester three at University is offered completely online for students. Previously the unit had included both on campus and off-campus cohorts, so it provided an opportunity to redevelop the presentation of materials to suit

the online environment. Using a constructivist approach, the unit included webinars, self-assessment quizzes, online mind-mapping exercises and peer assessment as learning activities. The aim of these learning activities was to enhance communication and collaboration between students (Selwyn, 2011) and build critical thinking ability. Further, most students already had some experience of Industrial Law, providing the opportunity to build from current knowledge through a scaffolded learning approach. This aligned to the learning outcomes for the unit and was underpinned by problem-based learning framework, aiming to provide authenticity, context and meaning to unit content (see Figure 1) (Herrington, Reeves, Oliver, & Woo, 2004).

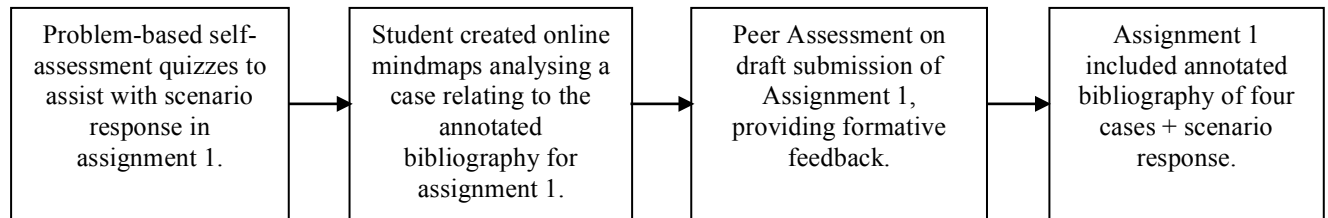


Figure 1. Example of how learning activities scaffolded into the first assignment for Industrial Law

Yuan and Kim (2014) outline six guidelines for development learning communities in the online environment, based on a comprehensive literature review of successful online learning communities. Table 1 outlines how Industrial Law was designed to meet the six guidelines.

Table 1: Design of Industrial Law against guidelines developed by Yuan and Kim (2014) on the effective design of learning communities.

Yuan and Kim (2014) Guidelines	Design of Industrial Law at UNIVERSITY
<i>1. The effort to build a learning community should be made from the beginning of the course and continued throughout the unit.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Careful planning and scaffolding of learning design • Online orientation
<i>2. Both students and instructors should be involved in the learning community.</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student-led discussion on scenarios in groups • Instructor contribution to student comments
<i>3. Use both synchronous and asynchronous technologies to create a shared space in which students and the instructor interact</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adobe Connect • Discussion forums
<i>4. Employ various strategies to stimulate discussions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Case study/scenarios • Online mind mapping exercises
<i>5. Encourage both task-oriented and social interactions</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online Quizzes • Discussion forums • Adobe Connect
<i>6. Assign student tasks that require collaboration</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Assessment • Online Mind mapping

Methodology

An online questionnaire was administered for students enrolled in Industrial Law after their results were released to gain feedback on the learning design approach. The survey asked students to reflect on activities in the unit such as Adobe Connect sessions, Peer Assessment approach and use of self-assessment quizzes. Of the 178 students enrolled in the unit, there were 37 valid student responses, representing 20% response rate. Coupled with the student feedback, we compared high-performance students with the previous iteration of the unit in 2012 to determine if the design of the unit improved student performance.

Results

Feedback from the online questionnaire was positive, with students recognising the value of the scaffolded and online learning activity focused model. For example, 56% of respondents identified the main benefit of peer assessment model was it helped compare their understanding of the unit content with other students. Other perceived benefits students identified were feeling part of an active learning community and the different assessment approach was refreshing. The qualitative data demonstrated students understood the benefits of a collaborative and scaffolded learning activities explaining they “encouraged a collegiate environment between students” and “it was a progressive and dynamic way of learning...which has enhanced my learning experience.”

Additionally, comparative analysis of student results from the previous iteration of the unit in 2012 occurred. Student results improved for Pass, Credit, Distinction and High Distinction students. High-performance students were perceived as students who achieved a distinction or high distinction for the unit, and this is where significant improvements occurred. This figure improved by 6% between 2012 and 2013, (see table 1) demonstrating the value of a collaborative learning approach in achieving learning outcomes.

Table 2: Improvement of results in Industrial Law at UNIVERSITY

Unit	Total Students Enrolled	Total number of distinctions and high distinctions	Percentage of the student cohort
2012	104	49	47 %
2013	178	95	53%

Discussion

In reflection, the use of learning activities that were relevant to the assignment and involved discussions between student peers and the lecturers, assisted in creating a dynamic learning community online. Maddix (2013) suggests the success of developing online learning communities depends on the level of interaction between students and coordinators to foster and develop a ‘community’ of self- respect, respect for others, cultivating dynamic learning and interaction. Activities such as peer assessment, case study groups and online mind- mapping have helped to achieve this rhetoric. Yuan and Kim (2014) agree, suggesting that students that are provided with support through learning activities, from students and the lecturer, can perform better than usual.

Ryman et al. (2010) perceive the idea of a strong social presence one of the key criteria in developing and maintaining a dynamic and mutually satisfying on-line community dialogue with students. The development of social presence online enhances student interaction and encourages critical thinking and is said to enhance student satisfaction with the course (Ryman et al., 2010; Yuan & Kim, 2014). In this example, and upon reflection, designing for social presence as a learning tool, could be more defined in Industrial Law, and perhaps the use of social media could be considered as an effective tool for this.

In further research, the development of online learning communities will continually be a focus for University Law School. The use of peer assessment and a scaffolded learning approach will be applied to other units as a comparison model to the development of Industrial law and online learning communities.

Conclusion

In the current education climate, the value of collaborative and dynamic online learning communities should be prioritised to ensure that students are engaged in their learning networks. In Industrial Law at University, a unit of study was designed with a scaffolded and constructivist methodology aiming to build an effective online learning community. The design of the unit aimed to align to guidelines developed by Yuan and Kim (2014), to build the underpinning communication and critical thinking skills of students. This paper has aimed to discuss the development of online learning communities, and demonstrate that careful thought should be applied in the learning design stage of any online learning community.

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