



Using online scenario-based learning modules to assist NESB students studying Corporations Law

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The focus of this paper is to highlight one aspect of a larger project seeking to identify and address the difficulties international students are experiencing in a core unit of the Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting) at the University of New England. Academic developers at the Teaching and Learning Centre, in consultation with the unit coordinator, decided to incorporate into the unit a set of online scenario-based learning modules to assist students with the IRAC (Issues, Rule, Application and Conclusion) law methodology. The modules presented a workplace scenario that emphasised finding, understanding and using information. They were designed to help students acquire the skills that underpin success in the assessment tasks and develop strategies to deal with the subject-specific discourse. The first module was made available online and two compulsory workshops were given to familiarise the students with the content. The students were then able to revisit the online module in their own time. This module was designed to assist the students in identifying the issues that are relevant to a particular client of a local law firm. The second module continued the workplace scenario and supported students in developing their skills of identifying the rule, applying their findings and preparing a conclusion based on the evidence. Both these modules form part of a larger, ongoing project that has included focus group sessions and online surveys to determine what difficulties international students face in the unit and how support should be provided.

Keywords: online scenario based learning, international students, law, academic skills.

Introduction

Non - English Speaking Background (NESB) students, predominately of Chinese nationality, are required to complete a core unit of Principles of Corporation Law within the Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting) degree. There are concerns that this cohort has difficulty completing a unit that demands understanding of a subject specific discourse. The intention of this paper is to demonstrate how online scenario based activities embedded within the curriculum and used as teaching resources can assist students with academic skills in a subject-specific unit. An ongoing, larger project is attempting to discover whether additional aspects of the unit need attention and how best to support the large international cohort. This project will provide a detailed account of the characteristics of the students and their experiences in Corporations Law. The findings and implications of this larger project are however, beyond the scope of this paper.

Many law schools employ the methodology of problem solving or problem method. While problem-based learning has similarities with a problem method approach the emphasis is placed on the learning process rather than knowledge acquisition (McCall 2010). There has been considerable research into the effectiveness of scenario or problem-based learning activities. Scenario or problem-based learning

activities are designed to immerse the student in real-life situations. Problem-based learning can offer students opportunities “to engage with complexity” (Savin-Baden 2000) and “to practice the application of theory through decision-making in a simulated business setting”. (McWilliams & Henderson 2006) The modules were designed using a scenario or problem-based learning approach and were made available online. They were to assist students with the academic, subject specific discourse of law and acquire skills that underpin success in the assessment tasks.

Online scenario based learning has increased in popularity at Australian universities. (Kindley, 2002, Fannon, 2002, McLaughlan, 2001). Many courses have developed scenarios that provide realistic learning environments in which students acquire skills in a contextual setting (Herrington, J., Oliver, R. & Reeves, T 2002). The first module, “On My Own”, was made available online and was intended to be used as a teaching tool that would supplement other unit material. Online scenario based learning requires the facilitator to make the “learning come alive” (Salmon 2000) and academic staff from the Teaching and Learning Centre decided to conduct two student workshops, demonstrating how the module could assist students with the complexities of Corporations Law. The academic staff advised the unit coordinator to explicitly incorporate the module into the pedagogy of the unit so that students are able to recognise the advantages that can be gained by using the module.

Background

Australian Universities are experiencing a rapid increase in the amount of International students, particularly within the Business Administration and Management fields (Birrell 2006). The University of New England is no exception and has considerable numbers of international students enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting). In a study of academic staff and international students at an Australian university there was “a common acceptance that the difficulties faced by international students centred on language comprehension and competency” (Robertson 2000). The academic staff responsible for the delivery of Principles of Corporation Law at the University of New England recognised that the international students were struggling with the academic requirements and the subject-specific discourse of the unit and contacted the Teaching and Learning Centre to discuss the possibility of redeveloping the unit. The academic developers suggested a scenario-based curriculum approach using interactive modules embedded into the unit. Embedding academic skills into the curriculum of a subject to provide a contextual experience is seen as an effective method of assisting students with language development. (Skillen, Merton, Trivett & Percy 1988). While this method provides opportunities for the student to develop their skills independently in a contextual setting, initial feedback from students indicated that due to student workloads, the modules would be most effective if used as a teaching tool during tutorials. In this way the emphasis is not solely placed on the student’s difficulties and responsibility for developing academic skills is shared with the teacher. (Huijser, Kimmins, Galligan 2008).

Module development

The modules were designed using a scenario-based curriculum approach that centred on the IRAC methodology. Academic skills were embedded throughout the modules and allowed for a contextual acquisition of cross-curricula strategies. The first module was developed using Adobe Captivate software that allowed the implementation of interactivity and provided opportunities for the students to make decisions and receive feedback.

The first module was based on the Issues component of the IRAC methodology. A scenario was established of a student who was being employed on a part-time basis at a local law firm. Her boss was very busy and gave her the responsibility of investigating the relevant statutes and cases that could be used when advising a client on an appropriate course of legal action. The student responded to the request but at each stage encountered difficulties. The first stage simulated language comprehension both in a legal and everyday sense and demonstrated strategies that students could use in their assessment tasks. The second stage reinforced the academic skill of paraphrasing. This skill can transfer across all subject areas and placing academic skills in a contextual setting allows for meaningful application. (Wingate 2006) The scenario became more complex and centred on identifying the relevant issues surrounding the client’s concerns. The reading strategy of “Skip” or “Skim” was demonstrated and the students were given the opportunity to interact with the module and decide on what would be the most efficient course of action. The scenario concluded by providing a summary of points surrounding the Issues component of the IRAC methodology.



Figure 1: Module 1 - Issues.

The feedback gathered from focus group sessions indicated that students were not utilising the module. Most students believed their time would be better spent concentrating on the readings and assessment tasks and those that had viewed the module concluded that it was ‘too long’. This reinforced the suggestion, by the Teaching and Learning Centre staff, that the modules be accompanied by tutor interaction. The feedback also assisted with the development of the second module that was much shorter in length.

The scenario was revisited in the second module and covered the areas of Rule, Application and Conclusion of the IRAC methodology. The module was developed using a software package called Wimba Create that allowed the inclusion of audio and quiz type questions while keeping the file size to a minimum. The Rule phase of the scenario concentrated on developing strategies that the student could use throughout their studies. It began by familiarising the student with the Law Library and how to find relevant cases within a database. The student was guided through a series of steps that culminated in identifying relevant cases and statutes that would support the argument given to the client. The Application phase of the IRAC process can be difficult for many students. The unit coordinator identified that many international students are reluctant to apply the rule to a particular circumstance or ‘to take a stand’. This section of the scenario provided directions to subject specific academic skills support within the University of New England and an evaluation of effective essay writing was embedded within the module. The Conclusion phase of the IRAC methodology was included in the scenario and identified important strategies for developing an effective conclusion to an essay.



RESEARCHING LEGISLATION

Legislation is a **primary** source of law. You will need to find/research relevant legislation.

RESEARCHING CASE LAW

Case law is also a **primary** source of law for identifying the legal issues in a problem question. In your search for relevant cases, you should have come up with some cases dealing with a legal issue similar to the problem question. You will then need to read and analyse each case seeking information appropriate to the problem question.

Figure 2: Module 2 – Rule, Application and Conclusion

The assessment for Principles of Corporations Law involves both essay writing and a presentation. The unit coordinator was concerned that the international students lacked the ability to deliver a successful presentation. It was decided that a third module be produced with the aim of demonstrating effective

presentation skills. This module is under development and will be offered to the next cohort of students in 2011.

Conclusion

The intention of this paper was to provide an overview of one element of a larger project seeking to identify the most effective methods of supporting a growing international cohort of students at the University of New England studying a core unit in the Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting). The development process of both modules and the feedback from the initial focus groups provided information about the way students learn and the ways they think they can learn. The findings confirmed the modules are of benefit when accompanied by active teaching to ensure that essential skills in Corporations Law be made explicit to all students. The next intake of students will benefit from all three modules and the focus groups and online surveys will provide data for the academic staff in the Teaching and Learning Centre to determine how to provide further support to international students.

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