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It's good to talk: discussion in blended learning courses in the context of continued professional development for solicitors

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Abstract

This paper evaluates (a) student perceptions of blended learning in the context of continued professional development courses for solicitors and (b) student experience of discussion in such a blended learning course. Students in the Law Society of Ireland's Diploma in Employment Law partook in a blended learning course that contained face-to-face discussion and both asynchronous and synchronous online discussion as an essential feature of their learning experience. Students were asked to respond to self-completion interim and final questionnaires. The results suggest that 'time poor' solicitors strongly approve of blended learning and their characteristics as independent, self-motivated learners mean they are well placed to fully participate in this form of learning; each method of discussion is valued by such students; the forms of such discussion, whether face-to-face, asynchronous or synchronous online discussion, can be complementary; the method of assessment has an important impact on student perceptions of the value of online discussion; and particular attention must be paid to framing synchronous discussion for it to be effective. With respect to implications for practice, the study confirms that blended learning is a valid means of course delivery in respect of continued professional development courses for solicitors and that such 'time-poor' learners respond well to structured online discussion requiring mandatory postings.

Key Words: blended learning; CPD for solicitors; online asynchronous discussion; online synchronous discussion; law

Context

The author's practice involves the design and delivery of diploma courses for qualified solicitors in discrete areas of practice. Such courses are typically six-months in duration, comprising weekly three-hour onsite lectures or workshops. Lectures and workshops are normally held in the Law Society of Ireland headquarters. However, the profession is geographically dispersed throughout the country. A recurring issue is how best to increase accessibility for practitioners regardless of their geographical location. One strategy has been to offer courses by means of various forms of blended learning. In doing so, the author utilised a number of forms of information communication technologies (ICTs) for teaching and learning, including discussion boards, chatrooms, quizzes and podcasts. It is not possible to effectively analyse each form of ICT for teaching and learning utilised in the scope of this study. Instead, this paper focuses on two issues, namely (a) student perceptions of blended learning and (b) student experience of discussion in such a blended learning environment, with a particular focus on the perceived value of asynchronous versus synchronous discussion. Such issues were focused on because the author was particularly interested in ascertaining if the attributes of solicitors as 'time-poor', independent, motivated learners would, firstly, influence their general perceptions of blended learning, and secondly, as the literature suggest, whether or not such independent learners would attach a greater emphasis on synchronous discussion.

Blended learning and discussion

Below is a brief definition of blended learning, with specific attention given to the characteristics attributed to lawyers as learners which may predispose them to this form of learning. I then describe in greater detail the literature pertaining to both asynchronous and synchronous online discussion, again reflecting on why the learning styles of lawyers (independent and self motivated) might be expected to influence their experience of each form of such online discussion.

Blended learning is defined as "a mixture of traditional face-to-face learning concurrent with the use of online learning" (Bach, Haynes, & Lewis-Smith, 2007, p.191). Thorne (2003) argues that the underpinning principles of blended learning are no different from any other learning, in that blended learning must take account of the

central learning requirements while recognising different learning styles and being prepared to offer support and to monitor and evaluate delivery. One of the advantages of blended learning is that the face-to-face learning is usually interspersed throughout the course delivery, which affords an opportunity to address any unresolved issues encountered during online learning sessions (Bach et al., 2007). An ability to learn independently is a fundamental requirement of online learning (Kerr, Rynearson, & Kerr, 2006). In that context, it is important to note that solicitors are identified as independent, self-motivated learners (Golding, Simmonds, & Samford, 1998). Therefore, it is argued that, given solicitors general disposition towards independent learning, such learners may be predisposed towards blended learning as an effective means of course delivery.

Learning through discussion is an indispensible aspect of student learning and such discussion is no longer confined to onsite tutorials (Ellis & Calvo, 2004; Gilbert, Morton, & Rowley, 2007). A key element of successful online learning is interaction, interaction between students themselves and interactions between student and teacher. Therefore, to be successful, blended-learning courses must incorporate multiple forms of interaction, including student to student; student to teacher; and student to content interactions (Bernard et al., 2009). In online learning such discourse usually takes the form of online discussion via discussion boards and forums. Such interactions can be conducted either synchronously, that is in real time, or, asynchronously, whereby postings are staggered. Asynchronous discussions typically occurs in an online 'threaded discussion'. Collison, Elbaum, Haavind, & Tinker (2000, p.212) define a threaded discussion as "an asynchronous method of communication in which comments to an original post are listed below, and indented under, the original post". Collison et al. (2000, p.212) further define synchronous interactions as "communications in real time, such as those via telephone, videophones, or live text chats". The relative learning benefits of asynchronous versus synchronous discussion have been the subject of intense debate (Bach et al., 2007; Johnson, 2008; Palloff, & Pratt, 1999).

There is a general consensus that online asynchronous learning environments have certain advantages over synchronous environments, not least because they allow time for reflection and flexibility of when to access the resource (Murphy, Rodríguez-

Manzanares & Barbour, 2011). Weaknesses identified with synchronous environments include difficulties in co-ordinating responses which often "frequently degenerate into one-line contributions of minimal depth" (Palloff, & Pratt, 1999, p.47). Further weaknesses identified with synchronous environments include difficulties in agreeing a suitable time for all participants to meet online and confusion and overloading as members are unable to keep-pace with the postings by (Motteram, 2001). However, Bach et al. (2007) argue that although asynchronous communication has been the dominant method of online discussion, synchronous systems of communication are improving and its potential cannot be dismissed. In this context, learners with a high cognitive ability are generally better placed to succeed in a synchronous system (Offir, Lev, & Bezalel, 2008). This is particularly relevant in the context of lawyers who, given the right learning environment, are identified as high cognitive learners with an ability to act as independent learners (Childs, 2004). Therefore, it is argued that, not withstanding the general advantages normally ascribed to asynchronous discussion, lawyers might be expected to be more receptive to synchronous forms of online discussion. As such, in the present study the author was particularly interested in students' perception of the value synchronous discussion compared with asynchronous online discussion. Furthermore, as Murphy et al. (2011) argue, a further possibility presents in that both forms of online discussion can be complimentary, whereby asynchronous discussion can provide sufficient support for self-paced independent learners (such as solicitors) with secondary synchronous discussion (and onsite discussion) being used to answer queries and for 'troubleshooting'.

Methodology

The research methodology was based on a case study. Case study research "investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context and addresses a situation in which the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 1989, p.59). The case study under discussion was an offering of the Law Society's Diploma in Employment Law which was analysed using a survey methodology to identify (a) student perceptions of blended learning in the context of a continued professional development course (b) student experience of discussion in such a blended learning course. Delimitations narrow the scope of a study (Cresswell,

2003). The proposed research was delimited to the specific participants of the case study (i.e. the Law Society of Ireland's Diploma in Employment Law). The case study was bounded by time, being six months in duration. Case study research has been widely employed in both quantitative and qualitative research in social sciences (Sarantakos, 2005; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) and are a common means of exploring in-depth blended learning and asynchronous and synchronous online discussion (Bernard et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2011; Offir et al., 2008).

In this particular case study, the virtual learning environment (VLE) Moodle, which is a popular open source course management system, was used to deliver content and facilitate online discussion. In terms of assessment, 15% of the final mark was allocated in respect of online participation. Students were advised that the most obvious difference between online learning and face-to-face learning is the amount of independent study required, which was based on a structured programme of work including 'active learning' (Webb, Jones, Barker, & van Schaik, 2004). Asynchronous online communication was achieved via a weekly online discussion forum. Each week students were required to complete an online task by responding to a posting made by the author in the discussion forum. Student posting were typically 200 words in length. Students had the opportunity of viewing each others postings to the discussion forum and were encouraged to respond to and expand on such postings. Rovai (2007) demonstrates that grading strategies influence the number of student messages per week and that there is a concurrent increase in sense of a classroom community for courses in which discussion accounted for 10-20% of the course grade. As such, 8% of final marks were allocated to participation in the weekly discussion forum. (The remaining 7% for online participation was allocated for the completion of online quizzes).

Synchronous online communication was achieved via a weekly online chatroom session. The weekly chatroom sessions were conducted during lunchtimes and the 'chat' lasted for approximately twenty minutes. Murphy et al. (2011) suggest asynchronous discussion can provide sufficient support for self-paced, independent learners with secondary synchronous discussion (and onsite discussion) used to answer queries and for 'troubleshooting'. Thus it was hoped that in the present case the online chatroom sessions would act as such, allowing students to discuss with the

tutor any queries or comments they might have had in relation to the previous week's lecture notes and asynchronous discussion. One of the difficulties identified with synchronous discussion is agreeing a suitable time for all participants to meet online (Motteram, 2001). In the present case, most students were practitioners with specific work commitments, meaning that they would not always be available on a given lunchtime for a set period of time. Therefore, while participation in the chatroom sessions was highly advisable, it was not mandatory and did not count towards final grade.

Data was collected by means of self-completion questionnaires. Self-completion questionnaires were chosen due to their inherent convenience and affordability, while the fact that such questionnaires also limit interviewer bias was also acknowledged (Bryman, 2008). Such self-completion questionnaires were distributed by the following means:

- An online interim feedback questionnaire was distributed about half-way through the course to all students. Responses were received from 25 of the 86 students on the course.
- A final feedback questionnaire was distributed to all students at the end of the course. To improve the response rate, the feedback questionnaire was distributed during the final onsite session and collected immediately from students. Responses were received from 56 of the 86 students on the course

The questionnaires contained both closed and open-ended questions. Open questions were included as a means of allowing respondents to answer in their own terms and to provide broader responses than closed only question would have permitted (Bryman, 2008). Responses to open-ended questions were analysed and coded to identify common themes. To code the data, the author read the responses and demarcated segments within them. Each such segment was labeled and coded.

Findings

All respondents to the interim questionnaire and 96% of respondents to final questionnaire indicated that the course had met their expectations. Students were then asked a follow-up open-ended question designed to illicit further information as to why the course either had or had not met expectations. 60% of respondents to the

interim questionnaire and 32% of respondents to final questionnaire provided comments to the effect that the blended learning aspect of the course was to some extent responsible for their overall satisfaction with the course. For example one student stated that:

> "*I love the online element of the course. I find it great and I can study/do assignments in my own time. It means that I never miss a lecture as such!*"

Students also valued the accessibility of the course and the fact that they did not have to travel to Dublin on a weekly basis, meaning that practitioners from throughout the country could access the course. For example one student stated:

> *"the online/ distance learning has been great for me as being a mother I wouldn't have been able to attend onsite classes"*

Such positive responses to blended learning, focusing on flexibility and accessibility, are to be expected and are in-line with general literature (Bach et al. 2007; Thorne, 2003). However, given the almost total absence of any negative or cautionary comments with regards to the blended learning format, I would argue that an additional factor may have influenced participant responses. As discussed, lawyers are 'time-poor' but are also identified as independent learners (Childs, 2004) and, as such, may be naturally predisposed to fully participant in such blended learning courses. If such a finding is correct, it would have a major influence on how future continued professional development courses might to be provided to lawyers.

96% of respondents to the interim questionnaire and 91% to the final questionnaire indicated that the weekly task posting to the asynchronous discussion forum was a useful exercise. This positive response to the asynchronous discussion might be contrasted with the fact that only 28% of respondents to the interim questionnaire and 16% of respondents to the final questionnaire indicated that they found the synchronous chatroom sessions useful. Again, the contrasting responses regarding the value of asynchronous and synchronous discussion are broadly inline with general literature which identifies that that asynchronous environments allow for greater reflection and flexibility (Murphy et al., 2011; Palloff, & Pratt, 1999). However, given the literature also suggests that high cognitive independent learners are generally better placed to succeed in a synchronous system (Offir et al., 2008), it had been

hoped that respondents in this case study might have been inclined to a more positive view of synchronous discussion. Below, I reflect further as to why this might have been the case. As discussed, the comments received to open ended questions were coded to ascertain common themes. The themes that emerged would appear to confirm that continued professional development courses for solicitors require a structured learning environment and that in this case such structure was best provided for in the asynchronous discussion forums. For example, 72% of respondents to the interim questionnaire and 29% of respondents to the final questionnaire provided comments to the effect that they valued the weekly asynchronous discussion because it *forced* them to keep up-to-date with the course materials. Again, students strongly approved of this mandatory aspect of the online learning. For example students stated:

> "*excellent idea [as] it keeps the information flowing and ensures I keep reading the text*"
>
> "*Everybody responds better to pressure*"

Furthermore, 28% (interim questionaire) and 25% (final questionaire) referenced that mandatory postings to the discussion board helped their learning, such as, the identification key points of lecture papers. This is in contrast to 40% (interim) and 14% (final) of responses that indicated that the unstructured nature of the chatroom session was problematic and that the chatroom would have benefited from a more specific agenda or set of questions. For example, students reported that:

> "*I think the chatrooms would benefit from having more specific topics*"
>
> "*maybe needed to discuss a 'case' as a focus*"

15% (interim) and 13% (final) of respondents stated that the chatroom sessions were too short and were not sufficient for an in-depth consideration of the topics. A substantial number of students (36% interim and 46% final) also reported that the time of the chatroom session, which was held at lunchtime on a weekday, was problematic and meant that they were less likely to participate. Again, such findings with regards to synchronous discussion, relating as they do to difficulties in timing, co-ordination and depth of discussion, are well established, having been articulated by Palloff & Pratt (1999). However, it is contended that in the context of continued

professional legal education for solicitors, who are identified as self-motivated learners, such barriers to successful synchronous discussion ought not to be insurmountable. For any form of online education to be successful, the learning must be directional and goal orientated (Bach et al., 2007). In this case study, the asynchronous discussion achieved such direction. However, with sufficient modifications, such as more detailed agendas, agreeing a more convenient time for all participants to attend online, and including participation in the overall grading structure, it ought to be possible to provide sufficient structure in the synchronous online discussion so as to increase participation and maximise the learning experience.

Conclusion

Maharg (2006) highlights that it is as yet too early to know which forms of ICT will establish a long-lasting presence in the field of legal education, and those innovations, while superficially attractive, which will ultimately be deemed to be of little educational value. An important goal of online learning is the creation of learning communities where members feel connected to and assist each other in their efforts to learn. In that respect, discussion in its various forms including online asynchronous and synchronous discussion is the means by which blended learning courses can move beyond mere convenience, to provide students with an opportunity to join ‘communities of practice’ (Ellaway, 2007). In this case study students clearly valued blended learning because of the flexibility and accessibility that the course structure provided. Blended learning offers an opportunity to integrate learning into existing work arrangements for busy professionals who cannot necessarily commit to attending onsite for weekly classes and is clearly a valid means of delivery for continued professional development courses for solicitors. Furthermore, it is argued that blended learning is extremely well suited to the needs of such ‘time poor’ solicitors, while their characteristics as independent, self-motivated learners mean that they are ideally suited to take full advantage of the learning experience.

Students also valued online asynchronous discussion as a means to keep up-to-date with course materials and to assist learning. Synchronous online discussion was more problematic, but should not be dismissed. In respect of future research, two issues in particular would have to be addressed, namely the provision of more structured

synchronous discussion and also ensuring that the timing of such discussion is more convenient for participants. It is also contended that the assessment strategy has an important role to play as it impacts student perception of the value of each form of discussion. With the correct timing of synchronous discussion, it should be possible to include participation in synchronous online discussion as part of the overall grading strategy and thus improve levels of student participation.

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