The challenges of student engagement on
GDL blended learning

Tina Hart: The University of Huddersfield Business School UK

Melanie Fellowes: The University of Huddersfield Business School UK

Abdul Jabbar: The University of Huddersfield Business School UK

Abstract

The Huddersfield University Law School has provided the Graduate Diploma in Law since 1998 on a flexible learning basis. In 2010 it was decided to offer the course purely on a blended learning basis with no attendance required. Induction would be provided via completion of an online fully integrated e-learning bridging course which would act as a gateway to the School of Law's e-learning provision.

This kind of provision leads to its own challenges for staff and students. It required detailed planning on pedagogy that is appropriate to the online environment. This was supported by the development of learning designs (Agostinho, 2002). In addition, for many staff the development of this type of pedagogy required training in software that they were not overly familiar with and the development of additional "online" moderation skills to supplement their "offline" teaching skills.

The change in delivery mechanism brought additional challenges which have always existed in the "offline" environment in one guise or another; these include what methods can be utilised to engage students in the online learning process?, how to facilitate the learning of the struggling student at the same time as the high achiever?, how can academics achieve deep critical interaction between student and tutors while helping them to develop their academic and personal skills?

Pure online blended learning has inherent problems that need to be addressed on behalf of academics and students. Current student feedback indicates that flexibility is a welcome addition but this needs to be underpinned with deeper academic support. Within this context how can academics develop pedagogy that supports student engagement without sacrificing the inherent flexibility?

This paper is a discussion of the changes made to the Graduate Diploma in Law course at the University of Huddersfield in order to deliver the course on a blended learning basis. The changes had to incorporate the requirements of the Joint Academic Stage Board (JASB) of the two branches of the legal profession whilst making effective use of the tools available in the Blackboard Virtual Learning Environment.

Introduction to blended learning

Various institutions have tried to bring change to the educational system, and to bolster student accomplishments, by focusing on, and learning from, schools and teachers primarily responsible for

academic learning and achievement (Rothman, 1995). Evidence has shown that e-learning environments have become more prevalent in teacher education (Skylar, Higgins, Boone, & Jones, 2005). This examination of how other disciplines deliver education and the rise in the use of technology and Web course tools, such as WebCT, Blackboard, and eCollege, has resulted in the number of online courses offered in colleges and universities increasing drastically (Kartha, 2006) and e-learning becoming an increasingly common form of instructional delivery.

In order to develop our distance and learning strategies in January 2010, the working group of the University of Huddersfield's Business School adopted the following definitions:

Distance Learning – This is where the students work at their studies away from the university and may never set foot on university premises. They may be Home/EU students or study virtually anywhere in the world. Distance Learning courses can be delivered entirely electronically, over the Internet.

Flexible Learning - This type of course may be also termed "blended learning". Students study using a combination of on-line learning and face to face contact (which may be optional). The face to face contact could be every week, once a month or indeed quarterly. More usually tutorials are delivered over a three week cycle.

This was based upon a definition provided by Njenga and Fourie (2010 p.201) who describe e-learning as:

> "…the use of electronic technology and content in teaching and learning. It includes, but is not limited to, the use of the Internet; television; streaming video and video conferencing; online text and multimedia; and mobile technologies."

In addition to this Garrison (2004) carefully distinguishes blended learning from enhanced classroom learning and fully online experiences. He goes on to say that blended learning can be defined as learning that takes place through a combination of face to face and distance learning delivery. At its simplest, blended learning is the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences (Garrison, 2004). The GDL team intended to harness some of the benefits of technology in the design of the revalidated course, still wishing to maintain some of the face to face contact.

Although there is evidence that e-learning has its advantages for both students and teachers it is suggested that what is understood as blended or flexible learning could be favoured by managers and students alike for the wrong reasons. Managers may believe that delivery of a course in this format will free up staff for other teaching or research once the initial materials have been written and put on line. It will also improve access to the course enabling those who would find it difficult to attend to study as distant learning students. Whilst this method of delivery *does* allow for flexibility, it is important that managers do not underestimate the level of staff time required in preparing and delivering materials and media which are effective and so meet the needs of students learning on this basis. Similarly, there is also evidence to suggest that there is a body of students who undertake such programmes without fully comprehending the level of commitment that is required on their part, erroneously believing that flexible or blended learning means that they can study as much or as little as they wish.

The GDL student

In designing the blended learning course the team had to focus on the characteristics of the GDL student and how his or her needs may vary from the undergraduate on our other courses.

The Graduate Diploma in Law as a qualification is a means to an end – a necessity before proceeding to the Legal Practice Course (or the Bar Professional Training Course) and then a training contract (or

pupillage), the ultimate destination being to qualify as a solicitor or barrister. It is an intensive course, which more or less compresses all the foundation subjects into one year, leaving little time for exploring the subjects in more depth or settling into the usual student life.

GDL students have generally completed their first degree and are much more focussed on the course that is going to provide them with a career and a living. The traditional student experience is behind them and performance counts as never before as the results will be used to promote themselves to prospective employers – real life has begun. Alternatively the student may already have a career but may wish to change to a different discipline or may have had a break to raise children and now wishes to focus more on their own career. Consequently all of the intake will be mature students, already versed in research skills, independent learning and production of academic output. Although they may find it helpful to engage with others, it is less of a priority than on their undergraduate course. In addition they are essentially in competition with each other for the limited number of places on the professional courses and for training contracts/ pupillage.

What was deemed essential, therefore, was provision of material that is easily accessible and a flexible approach from the institution as to attendance and contact with tutors.

Staff expectations of students

The new format of the course would rely on the student being capable of independent study and also being able to reflect on whether he or she had understood the relevant principles and how to apply them. Having accessed the suggested answers to the tutorial problems they would compare their own answers and be able to ascertain if there were areas which required further study or clarification, producing a personal reflective blog the tutor could access and comment on. The students were all postgraduates and so it was expected that a certain level of skills and knowledge would have been reached. It would mean a more hands-off approach from the tutors but that is acceptable on other postgraduate courses and not considered either a requirement or a desire of the usual postgraduate student. Further support would always be offered if needed.

However, although the GDL is postgraduate in time the GDL student is not a postgraduate *law* student and this is sometimes overlooked. Although some postgraduate skills will be in evidence, the knowledge of legal principles and language will not, and so in that respect they have to be regarded as undergraduates.

In order to be able to complete their reflective blog and recognise any deficiencies the students need a higher level of knowledge and understanding. So in some ways the GDL student has to be regarded as an undergraduate and the pedagogical approach has to be similar. A certain amount of hand-holding is necessary. With that in mind it is clear that the need for a constant dialogue between tutor and student was underestimated. The tutor's presence, whether face to face or electronic, is a constant reassurance, a person to consult and ask questions of.

Data collection

In order to obtain feedback from students and staff, and then fully analyse the success or otherwise of the changes made to the course, the Course Director and Deputy Course Director interviewed each member of the course team, based on set questions. Responses were then transcribed, collated and analysed.

Students were asked to complete separate questionnaires. However, the response was low, despite several requests, and answers were brief.

Students are also requested to complete a standard University Course Evaluation and this had been completed and submitted by some students so further information was taken from those.

Student panel meetings are held in January and May of each year at the revision weekends, to gain valuable feedback regarding the subjects studied, the facilities offered within the University and on-line, as well as the design of the course. Those students who are unable to attend are also asked to send in their views, either to student representatives or to the course leader or deputy. The minutes from those meetings also contributed to our findings.

In addition personal tutors canvassed the views of their personal tutees during Elluminate webinars, although again these were at times poorly attended.

GDL and the QAA

As part of the e-learning development the GDL had to underpin the course to meet the JASB requirements, in particular the relevant QAA benchmarks.

Thus the QAA Benchmark statements for law at Honours level were consulted. A comparison can be made between these and Bloom's Taxonomy see Table 1.

	Bloom's Taxonomy	QAA Benchmarks for Law
Level one:	Knowledge	demonstrate knowledge of a substantial range of major concepts, values, principles and rules of that system
Level two	Comprehension	explain the main legal institutions and procedures of that system
		demonstrate the study in depth and in context of some substantive areas of the legal system.
Level three	Application	A student should demonstrate a basic ability to apply their knowledge to a situation of limited complexity in order to provide arguable conclusions for concrete problems (actual or hypothetical).
Level four	Analysis	recognise and rank items and issues in terms of relevance and importance
Level five	Synthesis	bring together information and materials from a variety of different sources
Level six	Evaluation	
		produce a synthesis of relevant doctrinal and policy issues in relation to a topic
		make a critical judgement of the merits of particular arguments
		present and make a reasoned choice between alternative solutions.
		Autonomy and the ability to learn. A student should demonstrate with limited guidance the ability to:

	recognise and rank items and issues in terms of relevance and importance
	bring together information and materials from a variety of different sources
	produce a synthesis of relevant doctrinal and policy issues in relation to a topic
	make a critical judgement of the merits of particular arguments
	present and make a reasoned choice between alternative solutions.

Table 1: Bloom's Taxonomy and the QAA

Rationale for changes in light of Bloom's Taxonomy

In re-designing the course the team wanted to ensure that the principles from Bloom 1956 as articulated in the QAA Benchmarks (Table 1) remained intact. A number of changes were made. These included:

- Allowing students to have more autonomy in their learning by making more use of the technology for formative assessment.

- Enhancing student collaboration through the use of technology.

- The introduction of reflective blogs to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning and reflect on their career aspirations.

Technology and formative assessment for higher-level learning

As identified in Table 1, the third level of learning identified by Bloom in 1956 is application. This is also identified in the QAA Benchmarks for Law. Most law schools therefore adopt problem solving as a method of teaching and learning. In each module, students are presented with a scenario with a series of problems to which students should find the solution, or the most likely solution, based on the current law. This requires knowledge of the law based on research and the ability to apply the law.

The formative assessment of problem solving skills traditionally took place by setting problem based tutorial questions. The students could either attend the tutorial with the answers prepared or they could submit their answers on line. These were marked and returned to the student within two working weeks.

Prior to the revalidation, two colleagues had trialled the use of generated answers in their modules. Using the quiz option in Blackboard, they were able to set and upload to the VLE short answer questions. On responding to each question, the student automatically received the suggested answer. This meant that the student did not have to wait for two weeks to receive feedback.

The general opinion was that since these were graduate students they would be able to compare their answer with the generated answer and from that determine the extent to which they understood the

unit. It was agreed that the tutorial questions for all of the other modules would be designed on that basis, with the proviso that longer problem questions would be used instead. It was expected that having compared their answers with those generated, students would write a short reflective blog on their progress and tutors would provide the individual feedback to that blog. This would give the students more control over their learning as suggested by McLoughlin & Lee (2008) who discuss this phenomenon and suggest that learning effectiveness can be improved by giving the learner control over, and responsibility for, their own learning.

This strategy appears to be supported by work being carried out at the University of Wollongong. There, the Faculty of Law were involved in a project which adapted a generic, institutionally adopted, online learning management system (LMS) to a postgraduate professional legal education course to blend the online elements with other existing methods of delivery. In the report McCall (2010) stated that in general the value of problem based learning (PBL) has the potential to encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, be independent learners, to have less reliance on their teacher as their learning progresses, and thus improve the quality and depth of their education.

However the point was also made that teachers need to be aware of the drawbacks. Kenly(1995) and Kajewski (1996) have highlighted the following issues which should underpin these kinds of strategies:

- Students' loss of direction due to lack of perceived guidance;

- Students' lack of progress as they are used to teacher structured programmes;

- Students' resentment of the workload in seeking information;

- "Good" students thrive on PBL whereas "poor" students expect to be taught and so fail to achieve;

- Quality belongs to the teacher and not the student; accordingly lack of student achievement is caused by lack of teaching.

The problems identified above are starting to reveal and manifest themselves in the GDL blended learning programme. Whilst some students have answered the tutorial questions in order to activate the generated answers, it is not clear that they have necessarily understood the subject matter of the tutorial. Very few are completing the reflective blog, thus not giving the tutor the opportunity to provide direct individual feedback. Others are accessing the generated answers without submitting their own answers first, not seeming to recognise the benefit in researching and working out how to apply the law themselves.

McCall (2010) also went on to consider the merits of blended learning. He stated that the use of online technology can be useful to develop key skills for practice as well as subject knowledge.

Candy and Crebert (1990) identify the following skills:

- Making reasoned decisions in problematic situations;

- Adapting to change;

- Reasoning and thinking critically;

- Collaborating productively in groups or teams;

- Self-directed learning; and

- Understanding issues from multiple perspectives.

Enhancing student collaboration through the use of technology.

At Huddersfield the importance of ensuring student collaboration was identified at the inception of its distance learning provision. In 1998, the team recognised that an interactive learning environment on the Internet would support collaborative learning. The then course leader, quoting Jones, et al (1998) stated that there is;

> "…compelling evidence of the relative effectiveness of collaborative learning in terms of learning achievements, student satisfaction with the learning process and outcomes, and quality of interpersonal relationships and the emotional climate of the learning environment."

This is further supported by Nevgi, et al (2006) who emphasise the fact that student learning is a social process and student engagement and retention, particularly for off campus learners, will be a better experience if the learner is given opportunities to collaborate in a supported IT environment.

The main conduit for collaborative learning has been the use of the discussion board. However the team are ambivalent about its use because it is felt that once the first few students have posted a response, those responses can be so detailed that other students are left with little to contribute. Lack of participation has also been a concern. Thus some module leaders have stopped using discussion board questions. Considering McCall's research, rather than abandoning discussion boards altogether, it is suggested that individual module leaders look at the design of the questions posed and provide more guidance (such as a word limit of say 100 words per posting). If students are nevertheless learning from the board, as McCall's work would suggest, perhaps the course team should not be too concerned about participation.

Collins (2010) also supports the use of discussion boards, claiming that the on-line discussion environment and team structure enable students to work collaboratively, engaging in dialogue and constructing knowledge through their shared experiences and at times that suit their busy lives.

Again this suggests that the GDL team should not abandon the use of discussion boards too quickly.

In 2010, the team also introduced the use of 'Elluminate'™ as a means to encourage student collaboration. Each personal tutor had a group of approximately six students and the objective was that webinar sessions would take place on a regular basis between the tutor and the students. This appeared to encourage collaboration in some groups as the students agreed to exchange contact details in order to support each other off -line.

There is evidence to suggest that the use of 'Elluminate'™ can be quite successful. Collins (2010) refers to an assessment which included off campus students enabled by the use of web-based conferencing tools Elluminate 2007 and Wimba 2008, in the Law School of the University of Southern Queensland. Collins states that the technology gave real time networked collaboration and was a key factor in providing equality in assessment for on-campus and off- campus students, since it made it possible for off -campus students to present, as a team, live debates via audio and video. It also facilitated pre-debate team meetings.

For the GDL at Huddersfield the team therefore need to find effective and creative ways to give students the opportunity to collaborate. At present, this is done through the two study weekends. The introductory induction week where attendance was compulsory was removed in order to widen participation for those students who could not commit to a whole week away from work or family. It was hoped that the e-learning module and the use of Elluminate by personal tutors was a suitable replacement.

It is suggested that the use of Elluminate has not been a total success. After the first couple of meetings, tutors found that students were not attending the session due to other commitments or the availability of an optimum time taking into account the different international time zones.

Technology and online reflection

Reflective blogs were introduced to encourage students to take responsibility for their learning and reflect on their career aspirations.

Although Bloom does not specifically refer to 'reflection', the QAA benchmarks for law state:

> "*A student should be able to not only learn something, but to reflect critically on the extent of their learning. At a minimum level, a student should have some sense of whether they know something well enough or whether they need to learn more in order to understand a particular aspect of law.*"

Russell (2011) argues that the practical use of reflection as a learning tool for law students has not been adequately examined. She maintains that whilst law schools traditionally teach analytical thinking (one of the higher order skills identified by Bloom), other skills are dealt with poorly and mainly only for the purposes of assessment. The author advocates a systematic programme for the learning of thinking skills.

 The re-validated GDL introduced reflection as part of the students' professional development portfolio (PDP), during the introductory course and into each module. As stated above, once students had received the generated answers to tutorial questions they were to complete a reflective blog analysing the difference between their answers and the answers provided by the subject tutor. It is argued that this would enhance the students' development as autonomous learners and address the law benchmark statement above. In retrospect, perhaps the GDL team should have been more explicit about the requirement to complete the blog. Perhaps it was too much to expect students to complete the blog at the end of each study unit. It should be remembered that a full-time student is doing seven foundation subjects plus the Research project. Such a student was therefore expected to complete a total of six blogs across seven subjects.

Student views on blended learning

The questionnaires and panel meetings revealed that students appreciated the format of the course which they felt satisfied their need for a programme which fitted in with their particular commitments and responsibilities. Many were grateful that they had been given the opportunity to study on the GDL in this way, given that it would not have been possible on a traditional attendance based course. The flexibility of deciding when to study and submit work (within certain constraints) meant that they did not have to travel on set days each week to the University. For some students it meant that they did not have to relocate or travel from overseas with the extra expense that would entail. Yet there was still the opportunity for interaction with others at revision weekends and the face to face weekly tutorials offered.

They were pleased with the materials provided which were lecture notes, tutorial quizzes and automatically released suggested answers, PowerPoint slides, podcasts and discussion board problems as well as guidance on how to answer certain types of exam questions. The format of delivery reflected their status as a mature student who is committed to independent learning.

> "The course gave me flexibility and an appreciation of a mature student's commitment."

For many the course fitted in well with what they had already identified as their optimum learning style.

However, several also clearly required more personal interaction. Even though all students could access a tutor at any time either by telephone or email and could book a webinar session, some did not avail themselves of this opportunity.

> "The interaction is lower than I expected but that's as much down to me not reaching out."

A dialogue is equally as important as the provision of information.

> "I learned an awful lot during the first study weekend, just by hearing things explained and asking questions."

Several were positive about the concept of the webinar and recognised its possibilities. However, as its success depends on other students participating positive reception to this had been limited. Control of the mike is only with one person at a time which prohibits real discussions. Skype could be considered as an alternative, students being already familiar with its use and possibilities.

Overall students were content with the course but believed that more staff-student interaction would improve it considerably.

Academic perceptions on blended learning

The successful adoption of information and communication technology to enhance learning can be very challenging, requiring a complex blend of technological, pedagogical and organisational components (Mcpherson & Nunes, 2008). The role of the academic is to bring these complex components together into a cohesive teaching and learning experience.

For many academic staff online learning is becoming more and more pervasive and is starting to embed itself deeper into higher education. This has required a cultural shift and academic staff have had to confront existing assumptions of teaching and learning in higher education (Garrison 2004). Most universities are being compelled to adopt technology to support learning even in situations where academic staff are not wholly convinced by pedagogical arguments (Mcpherson & Nunes, 2008).

The GDL modules are based on learning designs provided by the AUTC project 2000. The staff who undertook teaching on the GDL in the beginning were apprehensive about the teaching methods that would need to be employed and how the technology would react e.g. how they would mark online, how they would created podcasts and how they would develop online quizzes. In essence for many academic staff blended learning was about rethinking and redesigning the teaching and learning relationship between staff and student (Garrison, 2004).

Feedback from the GDL team supports the work of Garrison (2004). Academic staff have encountered difficulties in negotiating the changing boundaries and shifting perceptions of blended learning. After conducting informal interviews on a one to one basis with six members of staff the views of Garrison (2004) were supported in that many academics believe that they cannot provide a meaningful educational experience through the online environment. One academic commented:

> "There is no real dialogue between the student and tutor. With the old system we provided feedback individually to the students and the students could then reply. It was a more individual based approach."

As discussed earlier clearly there was a problem with dialogue. This has been reported by numerous authors who advocate that the development of online learning needs to be strategically planned and developed for maximum engagement. While this may not require a great deal of technical skills it does require that academics have a whole new set of both teaching and learning skills (McPherson & Nunes, 2008).

Academics also commented that a gap had developed between the student and the academic. This "gap" made it difficult for the academic to ascertain how much effort had actually gone into the answering of the tutorial questions. As the student did not spend the necessary time on the reflective blog and engaging in other online activities it was in turn not easy to ascertain the level of understanding of each student.

However, in developing the online GDL course the academics commented that the dynamic nature of the course allowed students to access feedback more quickly. The negative connotation to this is that this was another method of disengagement, with the academic now no longer marking every tutorial answer and therefore in many cases not able to establish the level of student understanding. As one academic commented:

> "I think it is good practice to allow students instantaneous access to the suggested answer after they have submitted their attempt. This negates the student having to wait up to two weeks. However, I would like to check and comment on the answers and comment on the ones which lack detail or do not refer to important principles."

This led the GDL team to consider methods and strategies on how staff can re-connect with the student and create an online community that is conducive to teaching and learning. Some academics commented that we should run the course online but re-introduce some aspects of face to face in the induction programme. This approach would be consistent with the approach taken by other Universities within the UK.

> "The introductory programme where students attended was good in that tutors got to know the students and the cohort bonded as a group."

More research needs to be undertaken by the GDL staff and researchers to ascertain the viability of an online approach underpinned by offline relationships and whether this is the way forward.

Conclusion

Students from the previous year's cohort and the new intake all appreciated immediate provision of suggested answers. This meant that they no longer had to wait up to two weeks for staff to individually give feedback on their submissions at the same time as providing outline answers. The delay had been an obstacle to their understanding of that unit as they had already moved on to another topic. The new format made more sense and resulted in more efficient learning for the students.

Most students who came onto the course would not have been able to study the GDL if attendance at a week long induction had been required. Either they had young children to care for or would have been unable to take that time off from work. We therefore had attracted students we would not have done using the previous format.

As in previous years students were pleased with the materials provided. Materials have been built upon over the years in response to past student experience and need and there is now a wealth of guidance to be accessed.

Areas of concern

As students did not have to attend induction on a particular day several decided that they did not have to attend electronically. Although physical attendance is not required it is still essential that all students complete the e-learning bridging module and then proceed through induction during the same week. There were also teething problems with enrolling on-line which meant a delay for some students in accessing our Virtual Learning Environment.

The electronic quizzes were welcomed but several students were accessing the suggested answers without first submitting their own. To make it a condition that students should submit their own work first would result in many not having access at all to the answers which would be denying them the opportunity to learn. This can be compared to a student attending a tutorial and then being told to leave if he had not prepared answers. It is questionable, however, how much the student is learning by only accessing the suggested answers without presumably studying and understanding the material beforehand sufficiently to produce his own answers .

The reflective blogs were rarely completed. Many students considered this yet another task to complete in an already heavy workload. There is also the presumption that a student is able to reflect on where he has been mistaken or has not understood something just by comparing his own answers with those of the tutor. This requires a certain level of understanding in itself and is yet another skill to be able to compare and then recognise where there are gaps in one's knowledge.

The principal issue highlighted by both students and staff, however, has been the lack of relationship between the two groups. GDL students in the past have been challenging, committed and generally self-motivated and as a consequence have been rewarding to teach. The GDL team has always nurtured a solid relationship with its students, getting to know them well over the academic year. This year has meant that there has been a gap in the teaching experience which many staff would welcome back.

Recommendations for future development

Some students need to attend the University, or at least have the opportunity to attend, even if just for one day or a weekend, as an induction onto the course and as an opportunity to meet staff and each other. They still wish to feel part of the institution, to belong to a course. Those who are unable to attend could enrol on-line and could experience a one-to-one meeting with a tutor, either through Skype™ or Elluminate™.

Study groups could be formed, either through chat rooms or discussion groups. Although these will be monitored by the tutors it will be made clear that they are for the use of the students only. It is expected that this will relieve the feeling of isolation that enrolment on an on-line course can lead to.

Individual feedback can be provided to one problem answer for each unit of each module. The quiz answers could be designed to lead up to an exam-type question which students can focus on and then receive more detailed feedback from the module tutor. This should assist in a more rounded understanding of that topic and how to apply the law to a set of facts. There will also be an opportunity for a tutor-student conversation if either requests it or feels it necessary.

Discussion boards could be redesigned to encourage participation that will benefit all students.

Webinars could also be retained but used in a different way. Short, regular, webinars could be offered by each module tutor following each unit.

The use of podcasts has been greeted with enthusiasm by students and appears to be a successful compromise – technology but still contact with the tutor and so the personal touch so many seem to want or need. These can be developed further, providing short, concise, summaries of each unit so that students are aware of what to focus on in terms of principles and cases.

In summary technology has certainly assisted in the delivery of the course but it has to be recognised that some students are not altogether familiar with wikis, blogs and webinars and regard them as yet another hurdle to jump over. We must not focus on the new possibilities at the expense of good, old fashioned personal interaction which appears to remain at the heart of good teaching.

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