



TEACHING & LEARNING
RESEARCH INITIATIVE

NĀU I WHATU TE KĀKAHU, HE TĀNIKO TAKU

CASE STUDY 2

Using technology to personalise instruction in a large, first-year class

Institutional Report on the Teaching and Learning Enhancement Initiative at the University of Canterbury

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Why? Where? When? Who?

The Teaching and Learning Enhancement Initiative (TLEI) at the University of Canterbury was designed and implemented by the lecturer of LAWS101: Legal Systems, along with two academic developers. The choice of paper was based on the lecturer's interest in a particular aspect of the course that he found to be consistently and increasingly challenging to students: statutory interpretation. This decision to focus the TLEI on statutory interpretation was clearly relevant and well placed in the field of legal education, with other researchers writing about the same challenges (Eskridge and Frickey, 1990; Sepinuck, 2006). The TLEI went through three iterations and was introduced to LAWS101 students through team teaching during 2006–2008.

What was involved?

In 2006 the lecturer and academic developers created a Blackboard learning module for statutory interpretation that sought to focus on the specific challenges the lecturer had observed. Similar to Sepinuck's (2006) observations, he had found that students were not able to "see" the storyline of statutes in the same way as they could when studying cases. Accordingly, the module consists of telling a story about the creation, intention and interpretation of a statute, The Student Protest Act 2005, and introduces students to five characters that come into conflict with the statute. In collaboration, the lecturer and academic developers developed a legal statute, the storyline of its origins and intentions, scenarios involving the characters, and questions for students to answer regarding their interpretations of the statute.

Once students have read about the statute, and the statute itself, they can proceed at their own pace through formative assessments that correspond to each character and ultimately get the student to say how she/he would advise the characters. The assessments are not marked and can be taken as many times as desired, and students receive written pre-programmed feedback and guidance about their responses. The instructor wanted to use this feedback and guidance to create a form of personal communication between him and the students as they worked through the assessments. In his estimation it was similar to how a rugby coach might work one-on-one with a player during practice, with the intention of not needing to be as present during the game—or final exam in this situation.

In addition to the data suggesting that this module was effective for students, it also appeared that the collaboration between the academic developers and the instructor was a positive experience. As opposed to predetermined methods delivered through workshops, this type of project provided both the instructor and the academic developers with an opportunity to start with the instructor's needs and desires related to his course. By starting with a real context, real constraints and real possibilities, the collaboration has been perceived by all involved to be genuine, to have had a real impact, and to be potentially long lasting. This type of collaboration leads to all of the hallmarks of sustainable learning and action: ownership, co-creation, negotiation and contextualisation.

What did the research involve?

Throughout the process of collaborating, creating and implementing, data were collected from the interactions between the academic developers and the instructor, and between the students and the TLEI. After each iteration, data from students came in the form of responses to a survey about the TLEI itself (content and design) and its perceived effectiveness in enhancing their learning about statutory interpretation. In 2007 and 2008 data were also collected from students after they completed the final exam for the course, but before they received their grades, to find out how the TLEI related to their preparation for and performance on the exam. At the conclusion of the course in all three years, quantitative data about the pass rates and marks were obtained from the instructor.

What did we find? What were the research outcomes?

Students provided strong and positive feedback about all three implementations of the TLEIs through the online surveys that were included in the Blackboard modules. The following summary of their responses indicates their perception that engaging with the module was worthwhile to their development of learning how to interpret statutes.

- Over 60 percent of students from all 3 years stated that the TLEI moderately to greatly enhanced their ability to interpret statutes.
- Over 80 percent of students from all 3 years stated that the TLEI moderately to greatly supplemented the lectures and tutorials on statutory interpretation.
- Over 85 percent of students from all 3 years stated that the TLEI was moderately to extremely user-friendly.

The overall positive feedback from the quantitative data was supported by the following qualitative comments received after the TLEI implementations, which are representative of students' comments from all 3 years.

This was great. It helped my learning in a big way. Fantastic idea!

Great way to learn things, all of the topics should be done in this manner. Makes Law straightforward and online quizzes should play a greater role in this. Law at Canterbury needs to get into the 21st Century. I don't see any reason why this cannot be the case like it is in other departments. Law is hard enough without it being stuck in 1950's technology.

This is a great way of learning and practising statutory interpretation.

Its real value for me was just getting me thinking about statutory interpretation—getting me in the 'zone' which helps my study. Any practice is good practice.

Great to have something else to use as a study aid—interactivity really helps to get things into heads as well as helping to keep focused—easier to study from than writing out notes/reading textbooks etc.

What I found very useful and strikingly obvious and something that I hadn't really picked up on in tutorials or lectures is: It broke it down into a SIMPLE STRUCTURE on how to go about attacking a statutory interpretation question.

Great to see the Law faculty making use of electronic resources! More electronic resources and quizzes would be greatly appreciated.

As previously described, in 2007 and 2008 students were sent an email right after the final exam that asked them if there were any connections they would make between using the TLEI and performance on the statutory interpretation section of the final. The following two responses are representative.

It helped in the exam in that it provided practice in having a mental checklist of points to consider before leaping in to an answer; i.e. was the statute in force at the time, internal context etc. Having practised going through these, it probably made the process a bit quicker in the exam—which is helpful as I needed every minute!

I definitely found it helpful. The module, being set out in the way that it is, allowed me to look for different rules in each scenario of the module which was what was required in the exam. It enabled me to practise identifying what was in issue in each scenario and to apply specific statutory interpretation rules to them. Having this module available to practise these skills was a useful way to help me prepare for the statutory interpretation part in the exam and I would recommend that it be available to Laws 101 students to use in preparation for next year's exams.

How does this relate to the research question? What were some of the unexpected outcomes?

As suggested by the data collected, it appears that this TLEI can be considered to have successfully aligned with the overall aim of this project to increase students' learning and success in large first-year classes. In addition to accomplishing that main outcome, several other unexpected outcomes emerged, particularly relating to the nature of academic development.

Discipline (kind of) doesn't matter

Although there are unique teaching and learning aspects within each discipline, at their core these aspects can be readily comprehensible and accessible to those outside the discipline. Through learning about statutory interpretation, the academic development staff have come to recognise that the methods within it are related to disciplines they are more familiar with, namely English, history and Inquiry-Based Learning. This occurred through a clarification by the TLEI team of which transferable skills or outcomes were desired by the Law instructor (mainly critical thinking) and seeing how these can be viewed beyond disciplinary confines.

It takes a village to raise a TLEI

It has become clear through this experience that the TLEI could not have been created or implemented by any one member of the team. In addition to the instructor and two academic developers, additional colleagues who are adept at both instructional design and Blackboard were absolutely critical to the ultimate design and functionality of the module. In addition, to enhance TLEI 2 with audio recordings of the characters, more people were brought in to the process (another colleague and fourth-year Law students) to serve as voices for the five characters and the Minister of Education in the module. Perhaps as much as any aspect of the project, this opportunity for a number of people with diverse talents and interests to get together was valuable in and of itself.

The cover of a book is important

From both the survey data collected after the TLEIs and the informal commentary from students, the perception that LAWS101 has embraced technology is seen as a positive thing by many students. Although the content of the TLEI is not wholly different from what students were already doing through pen-and-paper exercises and tutorials, the fact that the course is now providing an opportunity via Blackboard is leading students to see their course and instructors as innovative and accessible. In addition, the interactive use of this technology to personalise instruction in the 100-level course may lead to an expectation—and perhaps a demand—by students that instructors in their other courses use innovative means to improve their engagement and learning.

A reason to get together

This project provided the instructor and academic staff developers with an organised opportunity to work together, but the collaborative value of the project has also worked on a national level. The academic staff development community at New Zealand universities is close-knit and amenable to collaboration because of the size of the country and the benefits of creating partnerships for funding and research proposals. However, because the funding and requirements of the project created the need and resources to meet on a regular basis (once every 3 months), the academic staff development community has had an organised opportunity to create and develop a community of practice around this particular topic.

Additional outcomes

Although they are less tangible than the above outcomes, which are focused on both students' learning and an academic's teaching, it appears that this project has led to other outcomes that are still evolving. These include a possible ripple effect on the teaching practices of the LAWS101 lecturer, such that he identifies other areas for technology and personalising learning; a model of technology for personalising learning that can be used by both the Law School and the academic development department; and the dissemination of this experience to other tertiary contexts.

Conclusion

The details of this particular project—the development and implementation of a Teaching and Learning Enhancement Initiative—are enmeshed in a technological solution, but to see the project solely in this way misses the point. In this instance—and perhaps in any situation involving technology, teaching and learning—the human elements of education are where any transferable implications or suggestions lie. Admittedly the intention of this project, which was to seek causal relationships between the actions of academic staff developers, discipline-specific instructors and students, is a challenging one to prove empirically. However, the data and experiences of those involved suggest that on a holistic level the premise is well founded, in that it created formal and tangible ways for people to collaborate on specific aspects of teaching and learning. In the end, the lessons learnt through these collaborations will perhaps be the longest lasting and the most illuminating.

References

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