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Providing a Discipline-Based Higher Education Qualification

L. Webster
Monash University, Australia

P. Mertova
Monash University

J. Becker
Monash University

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Abstract

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Keywords

Flexible online courses, challenges in discipline-based higher education courses

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Providing a Discipline-Based Higher Education Qualification

Len Webster

Monash University

len.webster@law.monash.edu.au

and

Patricie Mertova

Monash University

patricie.mertova@law.monash.edu.au

and

Joanna Becker

Monash University

jo.becker@law.monash.edu.au

Abstract

This paper highlights the growing need for the provision of discipline-based flexible online courses for teachers in Higher Education as well as acknowledging the significance of interdisciplinary cooperation in this endeavour. It describes the approaches taken in designing and delivering these courses and discusses some of the challenges inherent in developing, implementing and evaluating such discipline-based Higher Education courses, through examining the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT) Course in the Faculty of Law at Monash University, Australia.

Introduction

Healey (2000a) argues that within the Higher Education context there is a growing demand for the development of the scholarship of teaching according to the needs of the individual disciplines. He perceives the core of the development of subject-based teaching in: application of the principles of good practice on a disciplinary basis, development of the status of teaching, building interconnection between research and teaching, as well as research into the pedagogies of the individual disciplines. However, he also acknowledges that sharing information about one's disciplinary teaching practices with practitioners from other disciplines is important for the development of the scholarship of teaching.

His disciplinary approach argument is supported for instance by Boyer (1990), Rice (1995) and Biglan (1973). Boyer (1990) argues for disciplinary approach as a key to fostering standards, rigour and respect for the teaching scholarship. Rice (1995) remarks that improvements to teaching a particular discipline have to be rooted in the intellectual substance of that particular discipline. Biglan (1973) even cautions about the limitations to the extent of transferability of practices from one area into another with a different subject matter.

Jenkins and Healey (2000) point to the fact that institution-based generic teaching and learning programs for new teachers in Higher Education are a common occurrence in many countries and acknowledge the need for them. However, they also argue that there is a need to supplement such courses by discipline-based courses and point to the fact that individual disciplines have their particular concerns which cannot be addressed from a generic perspective. Healey (2000b) points out elsewhere that the combination of teaching methods and approaches varies between disciplines and that the teacher should assist the students in learning the knowledge, skills and discourse of the particular subject. He further argues that the learning goals often vary between disciplines. Healey supports his claim by Donald (1997) findings that social sciences and humanities emphasise critical thinking and communication skills, whilst physical and life sciences focus more on learning facts and principles.

Generic and discipline-based courses offered by Monash University

Monash University offers a one-year generic Course called the *Graduate Certificate in Higher Education (GCHE)*. This Course is offered to all Monash University teaching staff to assist them in developing their teaching skills. Following the establishment of this Course, and in response to the demand from their teaching staff, the Faculties of Law and Medicine at Monash University decided to develop their own Graduate Certificate Courses employing a discipline-based approach to professional development. It should be noted that both Faculties had established their own Education Development Units to specifically address strategic directions of the respective faculties. The Educational Development and Flexible Learning Unit of the Faculty of Law developed the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT)*, and the Centre for Medical and Health Sciences Education in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences developed a similar one-year course called the *Graduate Certificate in Health Professional Education (GCHPE)*.

The Educational Development and Flexible Learning Unit and The Centre for Medical and Health Sciences Education have recognised that Law and Medical and Health Sciences are very different disciplines, and thus need very different discipline-specific approaches to teaching. However, from the time of the establishment of their discipline-based courses, both the Centres have endeavoured to cooperate where possible.

Both the Centres have recognised the need for discipline-based approaches to teaching in Higher Education, but equally, the need to cooperate cross-disciplinarily in the development of such courses. This would seem to be in accord with the style of collaboration noted by Jenkins and Healey earlier in this paper.

In the case of Law and Medicine the common issues included the impact of professional regulation, the complexity of professional practice and teaching and learning in environments outside the University context. Divergence occurred in the area of assessment. While Law focused on negotiated assessment methods, the Health profession concentrated primarily on workplace and case-based assessment methods.

The following advantages of such a collaborative developmental strategy were identified by Lawson et al as:

- Efficient distribution and use of education design resources across faculties
- Widening curricular scope and horizons in both disciplines
- Establishment of common curricular framework as basis for future inter-professional learning opportunities. (Lawson et al, 2004)

In terms of progress of this discipline-based as well as collaborative work to date, the online Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT) Course developed by the Law Faculty Educational Development and Flexible Learning Unit has been completed by two groups of students with a third cohort commencing Unit 3 in 2006. In 2005 the GCLT was offered Australia wide and is to be offered internationally in 2006.

Course Structure of the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching

The *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching* Course is the first degree of its kind offered in Australia, and it is specifically designed for those teaching Law and Law-related subjects at tertiary level who wish to enhance their professional teaching practice. This two-year course is offered part-time and is flexibly delivered - partially face-to-face and partially online using computer and other communication technologies.

The *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching* Course consists of the following four units (with participants normally completing one unit per Semester):

- Unit 1 – Turning Theory into Practice
- Unit 2 – Tradition and Practice in Law Teaching
- Unit 3 – Evaluation and Assessment
- Unit 4 – Negotiated Project.

Unit 1 gives participants an overview of past and current theories and models of teaching and learning and examines how these may inform their Law teaching practice and experience. It aims to encourage the development of reflective practice in the context of Law teaching as well provide an introduction to the structure of the Course, providing a referring theoretical base for following units of the course.

Unit 2 exposes participants to a range of Law teaching models, theories, traditions and practices, and then encourages them to reflect on their own teaching approaches and consider the implications for their future Law teaching practice. Use of outstanding Law teachers in Higher Education to provide expert insights is fundamental to the design of this course.

Unit 3 assists participants in the design of assessment activities that are aligned with learning outcomes, and explores a number of approaches to Unit/Course evaluation. This unit is also supported by the Medical Faculty in exploring the benefits and challenges of various assessment strategies, with the Director of the Centre for Medical and Health Sciences Education presenting one session.

Unit 4 concludes the Course, and participants are required to design, undertake and evaluate a project situated within the Higher Education Law teaching area, which they negotiate with an assigned Law-based Mentor.

The GCLT Course is offered as a discipline-specific alternative to the generic GCHE course. Staff can choose which of the Courses they wish to undertake: generic, cross-disciplinary or discipline-specific. Our experience from the Faculty of Law shows that, since the GCLT course was developed, a majority of staff who undertook a higher education teaching certificate have chosen to undertake the GCLT course, instead of the GCHE course.

The GCLT Course Learning Environment

In the Faculty of Law, several Courses, including the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching*, are conducted using a purpose-built online teaching and learning software called LEX (Webster, 2004). An earlier version of this software, known as InterLearn, was developed by Dr. Len Webster and Dr. David Murphy of the then Centre of Higher Education and Development (CHED) at Monash University. InterLearn was created between the years of 2001 and 2002 through a partnership between the Faculties of Education, Law and Medicine / Science and the University's Information and Technology Services Division. It presents learners with an integrated 'worksite' which incorporates communication tools, activities and resources in a single environment. Underlying the structure is a database enabling students to respond individually or as a group to an online activity, which then can be stored and viewed when needed.

LEX is structured in a way that it allows construction of a more holistic learning environment, which encourages participants to engage, collaborate and reflect online. The heart of LEX, and the feature arguably most useful for developing reflective-type activities, is the Activity Design and Search features. Learners can participate in activities that can be shared at a number of levels. The levels of activity can be defined by the teacher as either 'shared', that is, available to all students, 'group-based', available to only a small group of students, 'non-personal individual', available only to the student and teacher and finally, 'personal individual', only available to the student for their own personal work.

The Activity Design feature allows the teacher considerable freedom to design online activities that encourage learners to develop a response, view responses of others, modify their answer to represent their newer understanding and reflect on prior responses to develop new understandings. This design also allows the use of online role playing and other group activities.

The LEX 'worksite' further incorporates a Contact page showing contact details of all Unit Participants, Teachers and others (for instance educational developers or guest speakers). It contains a Unit Discussion Forum, which enables both Teachers and Participants to read and post their comments. There is also a Notice Area where the Teachers can post their messages, but the Participants can only read from it. The students are individually able to log on to a workstation and accomplish specific tasks.

Romeo et al (2002) observed a number of benefits for both students and teachers resulting from employing online learning tools. For teachers these benefits were: organisational – in the encouragement of learners to take responsibility for their own, self-regulated learning; and curricular – enabling integration of curricular activities and creation of some authentic classroom activities. For students these benefits included: educational aspect – in assisting learners in building on their previous knowledge, helping them develop and refine learning as well as problem-solving strategies, and encouraging a shared ownership of learning; and socio-emotional aspect – fostering cooperation, self-evaluation, self-regulation, self-correction and commitment to learning. These benefits held equally for the online activities and resources employed throughout the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching*.

A Flexible Learning Approach: Meeting the Conflicting Demands of Academic Life

Academics are increasingly required to get involved in many administrative-related activities, in addition to their teaching and/or research responsibilities, which does not leave them with much scope for professional development. Professional development courses, such as the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching Course*, need to be designed in a way that accommodates the demands of such groups of learners. Such courses have to be developed in a way to fit in with the work requirements of these learners.

The Law academics who participate in this course have the usual range of competing demands on their time. They carry a normal teaching and research workload whilst completing the four units that comprise this Course. Some participants combine this Course with additional studies, such as undertaking a PhD, which can create issues in terms of workload, increased level of challenge and conflicting demands on time.

To successfully complete the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching Course* participants, tertiary Law teachers or teachers of Law-related subjects, need: access to a computer at home and work, medium-level IT skills (e.g. must be able to use a browser), participate in discussion forums and complete assigned activities.

To assist in creating maximum flexibility for the participants the following measures have been introduced:

- Units can be completed concurrently and non-sequentially.
- Assessment activity due dates can be negotiated with the individual Unit Teacher.
- Unit 4 is a work-based project that can be conducted in work time.

Experience of the First Cohort of Law Teachers

An inaugural group of Law teachers from the Faculty of Law at Monash University have completed the pilot Course. At the end of it they were asked to write their reflections on their experience. Their reflections have provided feedback in terms of positive features of the Course but also identified areas where some alterations should be made.

The participants in this first cohort identified some significant positives. The flexible nature of delivery of the Course was perceived generally as “very helpful” and well-suited to their diverse teaching, research and administrative responsibilities. They appreciated the fact that they could manage their workloads around their “other less flexible commitments” and this provided them with time to reflect on Unit materials and come back to them later if they needed to.

They found the web-page structure for the Units “easy to work with”, and considered the readings and activities incorporated into each Module “self-contained”, and the accompanying information sufficient “without being too cluttered”.

They also appreciated the information sharing and feedback within their groups, and being able to access other group members’ work online or in face-to-face sessions. Appreciation of the cooperative aspect of the group work was also mentioned, and many pointed out the significance of the combination of the online work with face-to-face sessions, as many thought that each of these would not work particularly well without the other.

A few participants in this first cohort also identified some areas which needed improvement, such as the technical issues they sometimes experienced, such as problems in accessing the Course and its individual parts online. These issues were mostly a consequence of the inevitable complex system downtimes that occur and the course director or teachers generally cannot do much about them. Although beyond the scope of this paper, the authors are of the view that the increasing use by Higher Education institutions of large complex online learning environments may in fact have the impact of limiting online learning innovation rather than encouraging teacher innovation (Webster 2004).

Apart from these reflections of the pilot cohort of Law teachers, the Course was also evaluated on a unit-by-unit basis using online evaluation software E-valuate-IT, where students submitted their surveys online after completing individual units. The surveys consisted of 8 multiple-choice and 4 open-ended questions. Overall, the evaluation of the GCLT Course was fairly positive. The participants felt that the Course had encouraged them to reflect more on their own teaching practices by exposing them to the feedback of others, and made them more open to trying new teaching methods, including flexible and online delivery. Some have found the online environment a very effective organisational tool, and they also appreciated the friendly and stimulating environment (where online mode was complemented with face-to-face sessions).

Considering the student feedback on the GCLT pilot Course, it could be argued, that such a learning environment, including the group set-up, could be effectively employed within mixed groups of teachers from different disciplines. To a certain extent, this is true but these authors argue that a majority of group discussions within the GCLT Course specifically focused on Law-related teaching issues, rather than issues that would apply to tertiary teaching in general. It should be pointed out that, the need for discipline focus in teacher development was to a large extent expressed by the fact that the Law teachers themselves requested such a course in the first place.

Ongoing Challenges

There are continuous challenges involved in the design of online courses. These may be ascribed to what Boud and Prosser (2002) identified as the key principles of high quality student learning within Higher Education. The design of online activities and tools needs to constantly reflect on how these: support learner engagement, acknowledge the learning context, challenge the learner and provide practice.

Even though, broadly, the participants in the *Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching* Course would belong to a community of tertiary teachers of Law and Law-related subjects, individually they might belong to different organisational units within different Faculties of Law around Australia. Therefore they would belong to different ‘sub-communities’ with different focuses and perhaps even understandings through the lenses of not only their individual subject areas within Law but also their particular Law Faculty cultures.

One of the key challenges of this Course is to encourage the individual Law teachers to share their understandings of teaching and teaching practices. Related to this is the encouragement of creativity, innovation and openness to review. All these are affected by the learners' individual 'sub-communities'. Thus to encourage the learners to network, transfer understandings from one 'sub-community' culture to another, and also to share their ambitions, has proved rather important as well as challenging in running of the pilot GCLT course.

Benefits of the Course to Faculty Staff and Developers

For the Law teachers there were a number of benefits of the GCLT observed soon after the commencement of the Course. For instance, the development of a community of teachers within the Faculty became evident to the Course developers and teachers soon after the commencement of the Course. Teachers discussed issues relevant to their discipline and Higher Education within the formal structures of the Course, and were observed discussing issues relevant to their teaching incidentally, in the corridors and staffrooms as well as favourite coffee venues. The Law teachers attending the Course have pointed out that the Course has encouraged them to be more reflective and felt that the Course has helped to create a supportive group structure where issues that might have been difficult to raise in more formal settings of the Faculty could have been raised in a non-threatening environment.

Further, as assessment tasks were aligned with participants' own teaching, many of the projects and pieces of assessment work were incorporated or trialled in their teaching allocations, immediately bringing benefits to the students in a relatively short timeframe. These improvement projects are sometimes difficult to initiate in Higher Education settings that have many demands, including the need for meeting research targets. The development and implementation of this Course can be pointed to by the Faculty as one of its quality improvement projects, as well as providing a structured and contextualised approach to staff development.

For the Law teachers, the acknowledgement of their effort by gaining a formal qualification has been perceived as a further benefit. This qualification has provided them with a formal Higher Education teaching qualification that they could take with them to other positions nationally and internationally. This would place them in a good position in those countries where a Higher Education teaching qualification is becoming mandatory.

Finally, for the developers of this Course who had previously worked in staff development at a Central University level, the Course provided a meaningful long-term relationship with Law staff on which to build teaching expertise. The satisfaction of this longer-term relationship and the benefits of a structured Course seemed more efficient and had greater impact than a collection of generic programs conducted in half days or short timeframes.

Strategies for Development and Improvement of the Course

Strategies that were adopted in the development and running the pilot GCLT Course to ensure that relevance to the discipline was maintained included:

Continuing involvement of Law Faculty staff in the key stages of Course and Unit design, implementation and evaluation.

Encouraging the Faculty of Law staff to teach in Unit 2, which deals specifically with the Law Teaching context.

Inclusion of a work-based project in Unit 4, which ensured that participants had the opportunity to apply what they had learned in previous Units to a Law Teaching issue.

Using feedback from the first cohort to inform the quality improvement process for the next offerings of the Course.

Possible improvements for future offerings of the Course - to ensure that relevance to the discipline was maintained - could comprise:

- Inclusion of external advisors and evaluators to monitor Course content and assessment activities.
- Increased involvement of the Faculty of Law staff in teaching of the Units, e.g. Units 1 and 4, further enhancing the community of professional teaching practice in the Faculty.

Conclusion

Recent development of discipline-based flexible learning courses: the Graduate Certificate in Law Teaching (GCLT) in the Faculty of Law and the Graduate Certificate in Health Professional Education (GCHPE) in the Faculty of Medicine, Nursing and Health Sciences at Monash University, Australia, has highlighted the growing acknowledgement of the significance of a discipline-based focus in teacher professional development. Both the Faculties were mindful of the specific features of their respective disciplines (such as, significant differences in assessment practices), whilst recognising the benefits of cross-disciplinary cooperative development and delivery of certain aspects of such courses (for instance, common curricular framework). The issue of increasing workload demands on teachers in different professions has underlined the need for flexible delivery of such discipline-specific courses. The paper then focused specifically on the GCLT pilot course. Some benefits (for instance, building a community of teachers within the Law Faculty) and challenges (such as, sharing teaching experiences among Law teachers) have been pointed out. Perhaps the most important is the role that discipline-based flexibly delivered courses such as the GCLT might play in giving new directions in Higher Education academic staff development overall.

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