

# REFLECTING ON TEACHING LAW ONLINE AT TWO WESTERN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A POSITIVE  
LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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## I INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Research on learning and teaching online in higher education suggests that successful learning takes place where there is a student-centred approach, where the teacher facilitates rather than lectures, and where a community of practice is created in which students feel supported and connected with their peers and their teachers.<sup>1</sup>

The sudden, unexpected move to online teaching and learning during COVID-19 at most Australian institutions of higher learning meant that teachers had to quickly shift their mindsets and adjust teaching practices to suit the new environment to ensure effective learning could take place.<sup>2</sup>

Further, the move to online teaching at the start of the pandemic was said to 'not truly [be] an online experience but a "pedagogical triage"',<sup>3</sup> done in haste with little thought as to what would constitute an effective and positive online learning environment for students.

Little research has been done on how to teach legal content and skills to university students online, due probably to the fact that this mode of teaching is not particularly prevalent in law schools.<sup>4</sup> This adds to the complexity of the move from more traditional ways of knowing and doing to the use of new technologies where materials used in the face-to-face classroom may not transfer easily to the online learning environment.<sup>5</sup>

This article outlines my experience with teaching law online at two Western Australian universities at the beginning of the pandemic in March 2020. It is not my intention to compare institutions or students, but to share some of the initial challenges faced, even as an experienced educator, in keeping students engaged in their learning during the first few months of the pandemic. This article also proposes recommendations, based on the literature and my own experience, for ensuring that law students have a positive and effective online learning experience should we be forced to deliver units fully online in the future.

## II CHALLENGES

The key challenges faced were keeping students engaged in their legal studies and ensuring they were fully 'present' while online. Cognisant of the research that suggests that face-to-face teaching practices cannot be transferred directly to the online environment,<sup>6</sup> I made an effort to adapt learning materials to suit the online learning environment. As both the lecturer and tutor for students from University A, I was able to change lectures to short 20–30-minute asynchronous recordings which were placed on the Learning Management (LMS) site (Collaborate) at the start of each week. As the tutor, I was unable to make any changes to the learning materials for students from University B, so although lectures became pre-recorded, asynchronous versions, they remained two hours in length.

For students from both universities, the previously on-campus classes became one hour online, synchronous tutorials where the week's content was discussed, and time was spent checking in with students' wellbeing. After the online tutorials, answers to any questions were posted on the LMS for students to refer to at any time. During the online tutorials for both universities, the breakout rooms, chat and polling functions in Collaborate were utilised to encourage discussions in smaller groups and to check that students were engaged. All synchronous tutorials were recorded.

Through utilising attendance data found on the LMS, and by recording attendance to the online tutorials, I noticed that very few students from both universities would access the lecture or tutorial recordings and that not all students would attend the synchronous tutorial sessions. If students did attend the synchronous tutorial sessions, almost all of them (from both institutions) would not turn on their cameras, although I always had my camera on. Not 'seeing' my students online reduced the student presence and thus their engagement in their learning.<sup>7</sup>

### III REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Considering the literature and my own experience of teaching online during the pandemic, the following recommendations for a positive online learning experience may prove useful:

1. Deliver materials synchronously and asynchronously, to allow for a variety of ways to engage students;<sup>8</sup>
2. Unpack content into smaller, digestible pieces (eg, 20–30 minutes of pre-recorded lectures);<sup>9</sup>
3. Make use of the technology to encourage engagement (eg, make use of breakout rooms, chats, and polling);
4. Give and receive feedback continuously to ensure students understand the content and feel supported;
5. Be present online by showing your face and encouraging students to do likewise as this may help students feel a greater level of connectedness in the online learning environment;<sup>10</sup>
6. Be organised – upload materials in advance;
7. Be flexible – if technology or the internet fails, find another means or day to communicate;
8. Be kind to yourself and your students.

### IV CONCLUSION

The sudden move to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic forced many of us to re-think how our teaching practices could be applied to the online environment to ensure a positive online learning experience for students. This article outlines the challenges I faced with engaging students online. The recommendations above are based on the literature and my personal experience. Although most Australian law schools have returned to a predominantly on-campus mode of teaching, applying the lessons learnt during the pandemic may prove useful should we be forced to move to an online learning environment in the future.

#### ENDNOTES

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6: Muller (n 5).

7: Garrison (n 1).

8: Muller (n 5).

9: Ibid.

10: Jason MacLeod, Harrison Hao Yang and Yinghui Shi, 'Student-to-Student Connectedness in Higher Education: A Systematic Literature Review' (2019) 31(2) *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* 426, 428.

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