

Research Paper

Title: Enabling authentic collaborative education in an online environment - the QUT Virtual Law Placement

Abstract:

This paper explores an innovative model for work-integrated learning using a virtual paradigm – The Virtual Law Placement Unit at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Australia. It builds upon the conceptual model previously explored at WACE 2007 and provides an account of the lessons learned from the pilot offering of the unit which was conducted and evaluated in 2008.

The Virtual Placement Unit offers students the opportunity to complete an authentic workplace task under the guidance of a real-life workplace supervisor, where student-student communication and student-supervisor communication is all conducted virtually (and potentially asynchronously) to create an engaging but flexible learning environment using a combination of Blackboard and SharePoint technologies. This virtual experience is pioneering in the sense that it enables law students to access an unprecedented range of law graduate destination workplaces and projects, including international and social justice placements, absent the constraints traditionally associated with arranging physical placements.

All aspects of this unit have been designed in conjunction with community partners with a view to balancing student learning objectives with community needs through co-operative education. This paper will also explore how the implementation of the project is serving to strengthen those partnerships with the wider community, simultaneously addressing the community engagement agenda of the University and enabling students to engage meaningfully with local, national and international community partners in the real world of work.

Introduction

Research into work-integrated learning (WIL) programs has been summarised through literature reviews, attempted definitions and conceptual models in educational literature for many years, (Dewey, 1938; Kolb, 1984; Biggs, 1999; Boud, 2001; Dressler & Keeling, 2004; Groenewald, 2005). The Virtual Law Placement (VLP) experience has required departure from and extension of those traditional models to facilitate a new type of work-integrated learning experience which is intended to operate in the digital environment and not in the physical workplace which was the focus at the time the Boud, Kolb and Biggs models were conceived. The conceptualisation of this model was necessitated by the pragmatic challenges posed by the changing nature of student engagement in higher education (McInnis & Hartley 2002; Anderson 2006; Patrick et al 2008) and the growing need to provide authentic work-integrated learning opportunities for all law students as early as possible in the undergraduate degree including those geographically isolated or unable to attend the workplace in the traditional mode. To ensure the quality of the learning experience in the absence of a physical workplace culture this unit was designed in close collaboration with community partners to incorporate the use of authentic web technologies into the learning experience to support both task based learning and effective second level analysis and collaborative reflection on the learning experience (Arnold, 2008). In this way the authors propose that the Virtual Law Placement experience extends upon the traditional work-integrated learning models and that its trial and evaluation can usefully contribute to the advancement of pedagogy in the field of co-operative education.

Authentic Workplace Experiences –accessed remotely

The Virtual Law Placement unit offers students the opportunity to apply integrated legal knowledge and skills to complete a real world workplace project in a team using online communication technologies to communicate with their supervisors and each other. In this way it aims to overcome the traditional barriers posed by distance, visa restrictions, family

responsibilities and financial hardship and broadens the range of employment opportunities to a global market. The technological platform includes a mix of blackboard, video, skype, discussion forums, ePortfolio, online chat, email and SharePoint with opportunities for face to face communication where possible and desirable. For the pilot offering, workplace employers were intentionally targeted to cover the spectrum of employment opportunities which are open to today's law graduates and included a top tier international private law firm (Mallesons Stephen Jaques) a law reform body (the Australian Lawyers Alliance) and a charitable international social justice organization which operates in SE Asia, particularly Thailand and Cambodia (Bridges Across Borders). Students were able to apply and interview for their desired position, and the range of workplace tasks were similarly diverse ranging from the research of an intellectual property web domain dispute to the creation of educational materials to inform and protect the rights of prisoners in South East Asia. Following completion of their projects, students were encouraged to reflect upon the impact of their work in the real world.

Online community of Inquiry

Throughout this unit learners engaged with their supervisors, teachers and teams in an online environment sharing their expectations, preconceptions and experiences. This learning approach was specifically incorporated in response to the emerging research suggesting that the level of Generation Y's exposure to information technology media during their formative years has led to a shift in learning preferences as compared with past student generations (Frاند, 2000, Oblinger, 2003) It was also an attempt to respond to the realisation that new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) are transforming the practices of both universities and workplaces which deserves recognition in the design of an authentic work-integrated learning experience (Shirley et al 2006).

Academic facilitator engagement was high in the early stages to ensure that technical issues were dealt with and where necessary supplementary skills developed. Facilitator strategies to encourage dialogue throughout the experience included instigating discussions,

acknowledging contributions, referring learners to supplementary resources, linking those resources, posing critical questions and modelling constructive feedback. In addition, a broad range of online resources were made available to learners to ensure shared understandings of appropriate 'netiquette' and to encourage an honest, sharing climate in which to develop their technical and analytical skills. The virtual paradigm enabled both synchronous and asynchronous communication between teams and workplace supervisors to provide flexibility and arguably a greater level of reflection than may have been possible in a face-to-face environment by enabling learners to express and adapt their understandings and value systems as a result of their personal learning experiences (Arnold, 2008).

Evaluation and Feedback

Following the pilot offering, survey feedback was obtained from 3 sources: an online University-wide learning experience survey, a subject specific instrument conducted through the unit Blackboard site and an additional survey directed to evaluating and improving the SharePoint experience.

Student feedback on ICT issues indicated that learners were generally appreciative of the unique opportunity provided through the online work placement experience, particularly those who had participated in the Bridges Across Borders placement:

“The Flexible learning environment ...suits my learning style and fits very well with my “multitude” of other responsibilities. The Assessment (with the obvious absence of high stress “formal exams”) was also more suited to allow for my capabilities to be more accurately measured. The opportunity to learn relevant new contemporary skills (ePortfolio) and access to materials (eTutorials) designed to solidify levels of existing knowledge and identify new areas for later exploration (online collaboration), all in one workspace...I believe to have been previously unequalled in my studies to date.”

ICT aspects identified as being in need of improvement included site access and navigation with a particular focus on better enabling and equipping learners to access and use SharePoint technology. Learners requested more ICT training and support and some reported difficulties in navigating the Blackboard site if more than 2 “mouse clicks” were

required to access resources. This is consistent with emerging research which suggests that despite the prevalence of “digital natives” in the modern University, the diverse mix of students in any cohort makes it problematic to assume any base standard of ICT competency and mandates a high level of technical support in embedding online learning experiences (Kennedy et al 2008).

Interestingly, despite a generally negative response to teamwork in the traditional teaching program, the online teamwork components of the VLP attracted surprisingly positive feedback:

“Team work is pretty awesome – atmosphere of collaboration and everyone doing their jobs. Online makes it very flexible for external students who would not otherwise have been able to meet regularly. In my team, there was a high emphasis placed on everyone being satisfied with every submission so a lot of collaboration was necessary sometimes even for the simplest thing...”

Supervisor feedback again focused on unfamiliarity with the Sharepoint technology but also recognised the value of equipping learners to navigate industry standard ICT whilst engaging in real world work experiences.

Conclusions

It has been asserted that the ‘engaged university is seriously committed to interacting with its communities in a meaningful and mutually beneficial way’ (Temple et al, 2005). The VLP is an example of one University’s efforts to blend online learning approaches with collaborative education to prepare learners for the complex and ever changing world of work in a global context. It is an intentional strategy to assist modern students seeking authentic WIL experiences to negotiate the barriers of distance, poverty, cultural diversity and family responsibilities whilst simultaneously expanding the traditional notion of professional work experience to incorporate non-traditional graduate destinations and international perspectives.

Evaluations of the pilot offering have confirmed the need to provide learners with earlier access and training to ensure that the learning experience is not frustrated by technical issues. This will require additional resources in the form of more dedicated IT support staff, the development of a SharePoint sandpit and more extensive software licensing for the next student cohort. Feedback suggests that improvements to SharePoint functionality will also enable better customisation of each workplace site improving authenticity of the online interaction and enabling each supervisor to have greater input into the feel and culture of their workplace experience.

The recent National Scoping study into WIL commissioned by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council reported a need for “collaborative and inclusive sector-wide engagement in initiatives that can support and sustain a broad range of WIL experiences, whether those experiences have a long WIL history or are more recent WIL initiatives” (Patrick, C-J et al at p.5) and specifically cited the VLP as an “example of diverse practice” (Patrick, C-J et al at p.16). In this context the VLP is a pioneering initiative which over time will contribute to the body of overarching theory which underpins the design of learning experiences in this dynamically evolving educational field.

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