Chapter 6
Blended and Mobile Learning:
Experiences from a New Zealand Faculty of Law

Sue Tappenden
University of Waikato, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

In New Zealand, law schools are constrained as to what they can do to incorporate blended or mobile learning into the core programme. There are two major factors to take into consideration when designing any course: a conservative profession, and the cultural needs of Maori students. This chapter will focus on the author's personal experiences of the practical applications of blended and mobile learning within the Law Faculty and will discuss student expectations of technologically aided teaching practices.

INTRODUCTION

I returned to New Zealand in 2001 having taught law in an English University for the previous ten years. I joined Te Piringa - the Faculty of Law at the University of Waikato, with every intention of promoting eLearning at Waikato. At that time our Learning Management System (LMS), Classforum, was being developed in-house and I embraced every opportunity to introduce its use to my colleagues, some of whom were very suspicious and reluctant. During that time those

of us who were willing to try radical new ways of offering university papers expended our energies in finding ways of utilising the new technologies to disseminate information and assist student engagement. Now, nearly ten years on, even colleagues who were previously averse to using the basic LMS have seen the necessity of exploring technologically assisted teaching, having discovered that students bring a complex digital environment with them into the university and their expectations about connectivity are high. Having established computer labs across the campus for student use over the past ten years, the University continues to provide funds to cover the costs of meeting the

need for new infrastructure, for example providing wi fi hot spots and provisions for using laptops and hand-held devices in lecture theatres. However in the Faculty of Law we are very mindful of our stakeholders. In particular we are subject to the rules and limitations placed on us by the council for Legal Education (CLE). Most of our students will go on to be members of the legal profession which is for the most part a very conservative body that casts doubt on the validity on degree components offered in anything but the traditional way. We are also bound by the Treaty of Waitangi to ensure that the Maori students receive a legal education that is culturally appropriate.

I am very conscious of the strictures that are imposed by the requirement to adhere to CLE requirements as well as the cultural differences of Maori students. I am devising ways of best utilizing new technologies within those restrictions to the extent that I have begun to wonder whether our students are actually learning better than they were before. In trying to meet the demands of the stakeholders at the same time as keeping up with students' expectations of connectivity there is a danger that neither group will be properly served. In this chapter I will describe my experiences of trying to reconcile the demands of constructivist teaching practice with the constraints imposed by a conservative professional body and the specific cultural needs of our indigenous population.

BACKGROUND

According to the Tertiary Education Strategy, published by the Hon. Michael Cullen in 2007, the challenges in university education in New Zealand remain the same as they always were – to provide a broad and inclusive system that provides access to quality, relevant tertiary education for all. The emergent international agenda for higher education policy, anchored in globalization demands the development of knowledge economies and learning societies. The transition

to a global knowledge economy is dependent on the creation and application of new knowledge and consequently this has placed greater demands on higher education (Weber, 2010). This means finding ways of creating learning environments that promote active learning and critical thinking. By engaging in collaborative learning, students take part in knowledge creation.

By placing the student at the centre of the experience, utilizing all the educational strategies that we have available, including technologically assisted techniques, we can engage the student using a cognitive approach to learning. Individuals develop their own ways of utilizing their existing knowledge to solve problems that are meaningful to the anticipated learning outcomes while remaining comfortably supported. The student is able to move through the stages of Bloom's Taxonomy of the Cognitive Domain from knowledge to comprehension, having had time and opportunity to ensure a firm knowledge basis, in a format that is guided by the lecturer but not constrained by the limitations of the lecture theatre. From there the student can proceed to the next stage in the Taxonomy which is application, by engaging in problem solving tasks with the minimum of direction.

There may be a dichotomy between students' expectations that they will be taught everything they need to know and lecturers' suppositions that their role is promote independent learning. As lecturers we are encouraged to facilitate students' learning in an environment in which each student is responsible for his or her own learning. There are also new challenges to face. There is a need for understanding new literacies, as staff as well as some students, have to become competent in ways of disseminating and receiving digital information. Some mature students are very uncomfortable with the idea that they must learn new skills to access parts of the curriculum. A survey was commissioned by the NZ Ministry of Education and released on Education Counts in 2009 identifying student needs, orientations

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