Improving Student Engagement in Meaningful Learning at Tertiary Level: Experiences from a New Zealand Faculty of Law

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ABSTRACT

In my experience there has been a decline in recent years of students’ willingly engaging with educational experiences unless there is some element of ensuing gain, for example marks towards a final grade. Small group law teaching in a tutorial setting has long been accepted as being the best opportunity afforded to students where they can interact with their peers under the guidance of a tutor in an effort to learn problem-solving techniques. However tutorial attendance figures show that the students who are in the most need of the experience are less and less willing to participate in these activities. The traditional methods of tertiary teaching are not encouraging this group of students to wholly engage with the learning process. This paper describes how online activities such as quizzes were introduced to increase student engagement and lead them towards achieving success in analysis and critical thinking.

Keywords: Meaningful Learning, New Zealand, Student Engagement, Teaching, Tertiary Level

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary institutions in New Zealand, as in other parts of the world, have to respond to the various demands of Government policies, firstly to make University education more widely available and then to ensure that the students we admit complete their degree courses. Funding and ranking are related to both of these factors, as well as to the number of satisfactory research outputs achieved by teaching staff. The quality of the individual papers that comprise the LLB is carefully monitored by the legal professional bodies. While being affected by all of these pressures, a successful law teacher must produce high quality research which underpins first class teaching as well as finding ways of ensuring that the increasingly diverse student body is equipped to pass rigorous assessment. The diversity of the modern student body is such that the transition from secondary education to tertiary study appears to be difficult for some students who, despite the best endeavours of lecturers and tutors, seem reluctant to become
effective independent learners. This group of students does not easily progress from the initial stage of learning which concentrates on the acquisition of knowledge, towards the higher order skills of application and analysis.

One of my main concerns is that the conventional way of presenting property law papers is not serving a significant proportion of the class. Laurillard (2002) suggests that conventional approaches to tertiary education may be unsuccessful in promoting higher-order learning skills. Whether or not this is true overall, there does seem to be a steep step between those students who grasp readily what is required to be successful in tertiary study and who strive for deep learning, and those who attempt to rely on a surface-learning, ‘scattergun’ approach in which memorised facts and cases are recited in the hope that some relevant information may be included in the mix. While approximately three quarters of my students make the transition to becoming independent learners and practice the skills required to achieve the degree, the remaining quarter fail to engage fully in the learning process. The members of this latter group have met the required entry standard to the LLB but require some element of assistance which is lacking in the present degree curriculum in order to ensure their successful completion. Many members of the academic community look to teaching technology in an effort to find a solution to the disparity. Some of my colleagues, on the other hand, recommend that we just continue doing what we have always done in the hope that change will come from another quarter. I sympathise with both groups but debate on the question does not remedy the current situation. Secondary education may not be able to prepare a proportion of students for the tertiary experience, so using teaching technology might bridge the gap between the learning styles. This paper explores my attempt to improve student engagement in the property papers I teach, with a view to increasing the overall incidence of detailed analysis and deep critical thinking in third year students.

Meaningful learning is more likely to occur in an environment where students are required to be active problem solvers rather than passive seekers of information (Jonassen, 2000). The tasks set for students need to be challenging, encouraging students to practice the skills they are developing. Tertiary education should be cognitively engaging for learners, promoting the application of the knowledge and analytical abilities they are acquiring. It is this cognitive engagement that is the critical element which ensures the effectiveness of higher education. Engagement occurs when the educational setting nurtures active processes such as problem solving and reasoning. In this context a student is more likely to acquire the thinking skills described by Anderson and Krathwohl (2001) as remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating and creating, in particular the higher-order skills of analysis, evaluation, and creation.

DEVELOPING A STRATEGY FOR ENGAGEMENT

My initial plan was to develop strategies that would generate student engagement with the subject matter as a precursor towards better understanding. Figure 1 represents the attributes of environments which have been described as being capable of optimizing students’ learning (Donovan, Bransford, & Pellegrino 1999). It is suggested that if we develop teaching strategies that allow us to cultivate these environments, the outcome will be the creation of an effective teaching programme. Teaching strategies have long been discussed and, for example, the benefits of using technology and the disadvantages of face-to-face lectures are familiar debates. However, if we choose the teaching methods before we have decided on the learning environment in which we will use these techniques there is a danger of losing sight of significant underlying concepts that inform a purposeful approach to learning. The ideal environment takes into account all three elements, the learner with his/her individual attributes, the knowledge with which the learner will engage and the assessment which will gauge success.
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