

Chapter 11

Using an Online Simulation to Address Equity Issues for Off-Campus Students

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ABSTRACT

The Middle East Politics Simulation (MEPS) is an online role-play exercise aimed at providing students with an improved level of understanding of the political dimensions of the Middle East, including the complexities of negotiation and decision making that face actors in this turbulent region. An online version of MEPS has been running since 1993, initially from Macquarie University, and since 2008 from Deakin University. This longevity provides a useful longitudinal perspective on utilising a collaborative online workplace to offer enhanced learning outcomes in the study of a political topic. The wholly online nature of the simulation means that students of all study modes and even different institutions can participate and benefit equally, thus negating some of the disadvantages faced by off-campus students in learning and assessment. Additionally, the student experience and depth of learning provided by the simulation constitute an excellent example of using the strengths of an e-learning environment to offer an alternative method of engaging and assessing students, which may be beneficial for accommodating the needs of those with differing learning styles.

INTRODUCTION

The steady increase in the availability of the more advanced e-learning deployments in universities over the last decade (Larsen & Vincent-Lancrin, 2006) reflects a growing commitment amongst

institutions to formalise their e-learning strategies. Whilst there has been some degree of confusion and conflation of terms such as 'e-learning', 'flexible learning', 'flexible delivery' and 'off-campus' delivery (Edmondson, 2007; Guri-Rosenblit, 2005), there is an increasingly greater understand-

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ing that incorporating a degree of technology into all types of study modes is an effective and efficient method of delivering course material, as well as catering for different learning styles.

In discussing the penetration of e-learning into tertiary education, a study carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2005) provides a graded scale that is helpful in categorising the various types of adoption. This scale places e-learning programs into the following broad classes:

- **Zero or Trivial:** There is either no e-learning presence or such an insignificant amount that it has no effect on the course delivery.
- **Web Supplemented:** The e-learning environment is used but passively. Course content, links, email, lecture notes etc are accessible online but this represents no *replacement* of class time or assignments.
- **Web Dependent:** There are elements of interaction and collaboration online that are required of students, such as discussion forums or some collaborative work. This replaces some classroom time but not significantly so.
- **Mixed Mode:** As with web dependent but this entails a greater replacement of classroom time.
- **Fully Online:** The greater part of the course is delivered online and classroom time is not required or is trivial in proportion.

A weakness in this sort of analysis and categorisation is in classifying courses delivered to off-campus students, where 'class time' is not a relevant term. Certainly in the Australian tertiary education market, off-campus courses that are delivered online do not often require campus attendance and this would seemingly rate them in the 'fully online' category given above. But it is debateable whether the approach being used for

off-campus students is actually more akin to the web supplemented/dependent categories. This is to say that students are merely using a web interface to access the same material as their on-campus peers and that the more collaborative and social possibilities of the Internet are not being utilised. This places off-campus students at something of a disadvantage, since they are often expected to absorb the same material and complete the same assignments but without the benefits that face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers can bring to their understanding and assimilation of the material (Bernard, Rojo de Rubalcava, & St-Pierre, 2000; Edmondson, 2007).

In redressing this imbalance, one possible approach is to use an online collaborative environment to create a 'level playing field' for both on- and off-campus students. This means more than just placing course materials on the Internet or providing discussion boards. It entails deploying tools and platforms that have been specifically designed for online interaction and scaffolding learning outcomes and assessment tasks around them. This at once creates equity between students in all types of study situation, as well as fostering the sorts of collaborative and communicative skills that are of benefit in life outside the learning environment (Bernard, et al., 2000; Bruns & Humphreys, 2007; Collis, 2005; Hamer, 2006).

Just as with face-to-face teaching, when designing and utilising online collaborative environments to include off-campus students, it is not enough to aim merely at participation (i.e. just fulfilling a mandatory requirement of taking part in an exercise). The primary objective should be acquisition and assimilation of course content, ideally *beyond* the levels afforded by assessment models based upon tutorial papers, essays and exams. This potentially improved acquisition provided by the collaborative platform must be made apparent to the students and they must be adequately prepared for the tasks involved (Bernard, et al., 2000; Bures, Abrami, & Amundsen, 2000). Students

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