

Developing Employability Skills by Using Blended Learning

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Abstract What are the employability skills that students should acquire in order to increase their chances of gaining employment on being awarded a degree? To what extent do students develop each of these skills in face-to-face teaching? To what extent do students who learn in a purely online environment develop each of the employability skills? The thesis is that face-to-face teaching alone or online learning environments alone are not sufficient to fully develop employability skills. The way forward is to adopt blended learning. What is blended learning? It is a combination of face-to-face teaching with online learning. Is the provision of learning materials in the form of lecture notes, power point slides, interactive self-test questions, access to an online library to encourage independent learning, effective blended learning? The presenter advocates blended learning which takes the form of online discussion forums, in combination with face-to-face teaching, as an effective student learning and skills development experience. Is the provision of an online discussion forum for student discussion alone sufficient for effective learning and skills development? Research indicates that the presence, participation and constructive feedback of the teacher/facilitator are essential for an effective online discussion forum. The paper will be based on theoretical research as well as empirical evidence (obtained by observation of skills development in face-to-face classes and online discussion forums). The empirical evidence includes the embedding of employability skills (including ethical awareness) at the Law School in the London School of Business and Management in 2014/15. The main aim of this proposal is to compare face-to-face teaching with online teaching, consider the advantages and disadvantages of both forms of teaching/learning to enhance students' employment opportunities, and then to put forward the recommendation that if academics wish to ensure the enhancement of students' employment opportunities, they should adopt blended learning with an effective online discussion forum to co-exist with face-to-face teaching.

Keywords: *employability skills, blended learning, face-to-face teaching, online discussion forums*

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1. Introduction

Higher education institutions are expected (by employers, the government and by the community) to produce graduates not only with discipline-specific knowledge and skills, but also well-developed employability skills so that they are an asset to their employing organisation. What are employability skills? Can employability skills be developed in the traditional face-to-face classroom? Can such skills be developed in courses which are run solely in an online environment? Is blended learning the answer to ensure that students undertaking a degree course do have the opportunity to develop some of the key employability skills required by employers?

We shall consider the definition and content of employability skills; the extent to which students can develop these skills in face-to-face teaching; the extent to which such skills can be developed in a purely online

teaching environment; the adoption of blended learning to overcome the difficulties in developing employability skills in a face-to-face learning environment or a purely online learning environment; what constitutes an effective blended learning environment and what constitutes an effective online discussion forum, which the author proposes as a vital component of blended learning. Empirical evidence of the embedding of employability skills and ethical awareness in the law curriculum at the London School of Business and Management in 2014/15 will be given. The paper ends with some concluding thoughts.

2. Employability Skills

Employability skills are skills that students should acquire and develop in order to increase their chances of gaining employment on being awarded a degree and successfully performing their roles in the work place once they have found employment. The skills acquired and

developed by students in the course of higher education fall within one of two categories. Firstly, there are the discipline-specific skills needed in the various disciplines such as law, medicine and accountancy [1]. Secondly, there are the employability skills, which are not limited to a particular job, but are relevant to a variety of jobs and relevant to all levels of employment from the senior to junior levels [1].

In the Dearing report of 1997 (The Dearing Report, 1997), employability skills were defined as communication, numeracy, IT and learning how to learn at a higher level. Other skills have been added to the list such as literacy, problem-solving, team working [2], 'imagination/creativity, adaptability/flexibility, willingness to learn, independent working/autonomy,... ability to manage others, ability to work under pressure,... attention to detail, time management, assumption of responsibility for making decisions, planning, co-ordinating and organising ability,' [3] 'the ability to use new technologies...emotional intelligence,' [4] 'the retrieval and handling of information, ... presentation, social development and interaction,' [5] 'critical engagement with evidence and its interpretation, error-free reasoning, the ability to analyse and synthesise information,...understanding of ethical issues, open-mindedness and tolerance of the views of others, awareness of gaps in ones' knowledge, a preparedness to study independently.' [6].

Employability skills are required not only by employers in the UK, but also in other countries such as Canada [7] and US. [8]

3. Development of Employability Skills in Face-to-face Teaching

Cranmer's research finding was that it is doubtful whether employability skills could be developed in the classroom. [9]

The author's experience of teaching face-to-face in higher education institutions since 1980 is that this mode of teaching enables students to develop oral communication skills, the skill of thinking on one's feet to respond to questions in seminar discussions and problem-solving skills.

Team working skills could be developed in seminar discussions by getting students to discuss questions in small groups. However, it is difficult to ensure that all the students in the group are contributing to the discussion. In a student evaluation questionnaire issued by the author in March 2014 at Birkbeck College, a student commented: 'More preparation on the part of some of the other students would have helped in discussions of the seminar questions,...'. The majority of the students in the Birkbeck survey made positive comments on the part of the face-to-face teaching time consisting of small group discussions and made comments such as 'what was very helpful was working in groups and discussing the same issues we had. Also, it helped to discuss with fellow students to see and learn things more clearly;' 'having a group discussion among students to increase understanding of subjects & learning from fellow students.' A study which reported on collaborative testing of students [10] found that collaborative learning enables students not only to learn academic subject-matter, but also to develop the

interpersonal and group skills necessary for teamwork, develop leadership skills and enhance communication skills.

Although it is possible to develop critical engagement with evidence and interpretation, owing to the time-constraints of face-to-face teaching, it is not possible to fully develop this in the traditional class-room. Important skills which are difficult to develop in the traditional classroom situation involving face-to-face teaching are written communication skills and IT skills. Written communication skills have to be developed by formative and summative assessments outside the classroom. To develop IT skills one has to set assessments which require the use of such skills.

Students need to be personally engaged (by the teaching/learning methods being active and interactive) in career development planning and also the world of work has to be made real by including or drawing from direct experience of work [11]. Watts lists the following as personally engaging teaching/learning methods: 'facilitative teaching styles that encourage and model an open and honest exploration of the career planning process, using short 'buzz-group' discussions within lecture-group sessions, self-audits (e.g. of personal and career management skills), role-play (e.g. recruitment personnel, mock interviews); peer review (e.g. of CVs or of assignments), card-sort exercises (e.g. devising a sequence of decision-making activities), 'snowballing' activities which begin with pair-based work, progressively combining to produce a larger-group response to the challenge set, problem-based methods, supplementing lectures with on-line peer discussion groups or tutor-managed discussion forums, self-directed learning'.

4. Development of Employability Skills in Online Teaching/Learning

The author has online teaching experience since February 2012. The experience is in an asynchronous [12] text-based postgraduate course with students from many parts of the world in different time-zones. There are lecture notes and other study materials posted on the web. However, the main method of teaching/learning is through an online discussion forum, which is in accord with the theory that for effective learning to take place a learning community needs to be established where students can actively participate by engaging in interaction with other students and with the instructor/facilitator of learning [13].

An online discussion forum is much more effective in developing written communication skills [14] than is the case with face to face teaching. Students following the 8-week module have three assessments each week consisting of an initial post in answer to a discussion question, follow-on posts and a weekly assignment, ending with the submission of a project in the last week. The students learn time-management skills and the skill of working under pressure owing to a heavy assessment load, requiring reading of the recommended textbook and weekly notes and research on relevant journal articles and other sources of information. The initial posts by the students are posted on the discussion forum. The follow-on posts are based on a critical review of journal articles, case law and the posts of fellow-students, which assists in developing the skill of critical analysis based upon

reflection and research [14], which is difficult to achieve in traditional face-to-face teaching. As Owston [15] states, while in 'a live classroom, where conversations disappear, ...' in an online learning environment, 'every thought' is "captured for future examination, elaboration, and extension." This stimulates more thoughtful discussions in comparison with some discussions which take place in the traditional classroom in time-constrained teaching/learning conditions, where 'students have to remember what has been said and be verbally quick and assertive or opportunities to contribute are lost.' [16] In contrast, in an online discussion forum there is equality of opportunity of interaction [17], which means that each student has the opportunity to contribute to the class discussion and develop their written communication skills with critical reasoning.

Collaborative skills could also be developed in an online environment by dividing the class into groups to work on a group project [15]. Collaborative learning which involves sharing with others one's own ideas and responding to others in achieving a shared goal, improves thinking and deepens understanding [18]. In a comparison of students at a university following the same module, some groups in a face-to-face collaborative learning setting and the other groups in an online collaborative learning environment, it was found that there was no difference between the two groups in increasing professional knowledge and competencies through collaborative learning and in the evaluation of the collaborative experience [19]. A significant finding was that four of the five online groups completed their collaborative task before all (except one) of the face-to-face groups, indicating that the online students were more efficient in working together [19]. This could be explained by the fact that in an asynchronous online setting the participants engage in the group project in their own time, within the time deadline set by the instructor, whereas in the face-to-face situation, meetings have to be arranged at a time convenient to all students in the group, which may not be easy as students have work, family and other commitments.

Rovai [20] points out strengths in online learning environments, such as being more interactive than traditional courses, 'reflective versus spontaneous discussion'. However, skilful facilitation is needed by the instructor to prevent domination by a small number of students [20] (which can also happen in a face-to-face seminar) and clarifying misconceptions (which may not be rectified by the facilitator immediately), unlike in a face-to-face situation where the tutor could immediately provide clarification.

The main drawback of asynchronous text-based online learning is that it is unable to develop oral communication skills. It is difficult to organise video-conferencing when students and faculty are located in different parts of the world. Misconceptions in learning could take place owing to the 'absence of facial expressions and voice inflections.' [21] The social interactions between students and students and faculty which assist in building a sense of community cannot take place in a totally online learning environment, which can be an isolated learning experience with the consequence of a higher drop-out rate. [21].

Students who are verbally articulate and who would be contributing to traditional classroom discussions may not wish to post to online forums, whereas such forums are useful for shy students to express their opinions. [14] There is more opportunity for students to ask questions from the instructor in an online environment [14] as there are less time constraints than in a one or two hour face-to-face teaching/learning situation. Students are more inhibited in asking questions from the teacher in traditional classrooms, as they worry about how other students perceive their questions, whereas Vonderwell [14] found in her study that the perception of other students was not an inhibiting factor in asking questions from the instructor in the online environment.

Students who do not know the other students before the commencement of the online class may be disinclined to seek out other students via email to engage in the collaborative work required in class discussions [14]. Those students who do ask questions from their peers outside the classroom may have the frustrating experience of their questions being unanswered, which would not happen in a face-to-face environment where it is difficult to ignore questions [14].

Students found it more difficult to establish an interpersonal relationship with their online instructor, whom they never meet face-to-face, in comparison with the possibility of establishing such a relationship with their teacher in a traditional teaching situation. [14]

In a face-to-face situation the student will get an immediate response to their question from the teacher; but in an online learning situation, the response may be delayed by a few hours or even by a day. [14]

The above analysis indicates that face-to-face teaching alone or online learning environments alone is not sufficient to fully develop employability skills. The way forward is to adopt blended learning.

5. Blended Learning

What is blended learning? It is a combination of face-to-face teaching with online learning. There is a 'blending of different times and places for learning, which offers a more flexible learning environment to students, resulting in a 'more robust educational experience than either traditional or fully online learning can offer', with lower withdrawal rates and higher success rates. [21] In a study of one hundred and forty two undergraduates a 'superior' learning environment and students scoring higher grades were found to exist when there was a combination of face-to-face and online teaching/learning, in comparison with learning solely by means of a traditional classroom. [22] Wu and Hiltz [23] found that a mixture of face-to-face and online discussions improved the student perception of learning. Blended learning gives more opportunities for students to connect with the learning experience. [24] If students are unable to attend some of the face-to-face learning sessions, providing them with the opportunity of interacting with the content of the learning material and interacting with the tutor and other students enable them to retain connection with the course [24] Students expect flexible legal education which accommodates their various commitments. [25].

'...simply turning classroom courses into blended formats do not necessarily provide students with more interactive and flexible learning experiences.' [26]. Blended learning is not simply adding some online elements to a dominant method of teaching face-to-face in a traditional classroom. [16] Adding on a face-to-face element to an online learning environment is not effective blended learning. [16] In introducing blended learning there should be a 'fundamental reconceptualization and reorganization of the teaching and learning dynamic'. [16] Designers of blended learning should fully integrate the various components of the course and decide which parts of the course should be delivered in the face-to-face class and which online. [26]

To increase the likelihood of active participation by students in a blended e-learning system, Wu and others [27] recommend establishing a 'good social environment to facilitate the student-to-student and student-to-instructor connectivity interaction (e.g., interactive communication and collaborative learning).' The quality of the online teaching, learning resources, the student workload and student interaction are factors to be borne in mind in designing a blended learning system. [28] The study by Ginns and Ellis [28] found that positive student perceptions of the quality of online teaching in the blended learning environment and the level of online interaction were related to a higher grade.

6. Effective Blended Learning

Is the provision of learning materials in the form of lecture notes, power point slides, interactive self-test questions, access to an online library to encourage independent learning, effective blended learning? The provision of web learning resources alone would have been suitable for the Information Age when learning consisted of independent learning to acquire knowledge. However, we have moved from the Information Age to the Interaction Age. [29] In designing learning spaces in the 21st century, educational designers should bear in mind the experience and expectations of students born after the early 1980s. [29]

Nehme [30] advocates blended learning i.e. online classes in addition to face-to-face classes, as students who do not participate in face-to-face classes may participate in an online environment, which would increase their confidence and motivate them to learn. Providing an online space for students to develop issues discussed in a face-to-face classroom and express their ideas would enable students to feel part of the group. Colbran and Gilding [31] report that blended learning to supplement face-to-face instruction is adopted in many Australian law schools. Of 34 law schools surveyed 21 used discussion forums. The conclusion was that blended learning has a slightly better student learning outcome than face-to-face alone or completely online, which they found to be equally effective.

The author advocates blended learning which takes the form of online discussion forums, in combination with face-to-face teaching, as an effective student learning and skills development experience. There should be an integration of the 'fast-paced, spontaneous verbal communication in a face-to-face learning environment'

with the opportunity for the development of 'reflection and precision of expression' in written communication by means of online communication. [16] Garrison and Kanuka [16] are of the view that 'discourse facilitated through asynchronous Internet communication tools provides a platform where participants can confront questionable ideas and faulty thinking in more objective and reflective ways than might be possible in a face-to-face context.' In the author's experience of teaching, online discussion forums offer greater opportunity for students to develop critical thinking skills, based on reflection, than is possible in a time-constrained traditional classroom.

7. Effective Online Discussion Forums

Online discussion forums vary from structured forums on particular topics, to unstructured forums on any topic and from forums which are meant solely for student participation and discussion, to forums where the students and the instructor participate and contribute posts. For an effective online discussion forum, the instructor and the students should interact in collaborating to construct knowledge. [14]

Yang and others [32] recognise the importance of a high level of student participation in an effective online discussion forum and attempt to find out what motivates students to participate. The findings indicate that hedonic and utilitarian outcomes and peer pressure have a positive influence on student intention to participate. The small size of the group and the prior knowledge of the other participants may encourage students to actively participate in the online forum. [33]

Is the provision of an online discussion forum for student discussion alone sufficient for effective learning of academic content and skills development? Research indicates that the presence, participation and constructive feedback of the facilitator/instructor are essential for an effective online discussion forum. Teaching participation is both by facilitating the discussion and by direct instruction. [13] The discussion could be facilitated by identifying 'areas of agreement and disagreement, seeking to reach consensus and understanding, encouraging, acknowledging, and reinforcing student contributions, setting the climate for learning, drawing in participants, prompting discussion, and assessing the efficacy of the process. [13] Direct instruction can take the form of 'presenting content and questions, focusing the discussion on specific issues, summarizing discussion, confirming understanding, diagnosing misperceptions, injecting knowledge from diverse sources and responding to technical concerns'. [13]

Cranney and others [34] indicate the importance of instructor participation in a virtual classroom. A strong link was found between the time spent by the instructor in the online class and the grades earned by students for their discussion board posts. However, the study did not find a strong link between student grades for discussion forum posts and the number of instructor posts. The researchers found that instructors had to spend a minimum of 6.25 hours per week in the online classroom to obtain the best performance from the students. (The author received two module reports on 22 August 2013 from module grading.

In one the average number of hours per week logged in was 9.1, but in the other module report for another class the corresponding figure was 17.3 hours. The author's experience is that the number of hours logged in depends on factors such as the ability of students in the class, the number of queries from students seeking clarification and the number of misconceptions in student posts which need correction).

Mazzolini and Maddison [35] found that when there were frequent postings in the discussion forum by the instructor there were less student postings. Students tended to prefer to respond to questions by other students, who they were pleased to help, rather than questions by instructors who they perceived as trying to find gaps in their knowledge. However, instructors who posted frequently were rated highly for their enthusiasm and the expertise of their subject. Instructors who made a minimal contribution to the discussion forum were not popular with students. The preferred role for an instructor was to be a facilitator of the discussion forum, acting as a guide. In another study these authors [36] found that the frequency of the instructor initiating the initial post (distinguished from the instructor contributing to a student post) results in a reduction in the number of student posts. Student perception of the usefulness of the discussion forum and of the course did not depend on the frequency of instructor posting to the discussion forum. While students valued instructors who posted frequently (as they were concerned whether there were errors made by other students) they did not think the instructor should answer a student question as soon as it is posed, but should wait a few days before posting answer, so as to give the opportunity to other students to provide the answer. In a student questionnaire evaluation, [37] while 75% of the respondents expressed satisfaction with the quality of the feedback by the lecturer on their postings, only 57.1% were satisfied with the lecturer participation in the online discussion in terms of quality and even fewer (53.6%) were satisfied with the amount of lecturer participation. In contrast, over 70% were satisfied with student participation in the online discussions, but less than 29% were satisfied with student feedback on the posts of other students. This study indicates that lecturer presence and contribution to classroom discussions was vital to an effective learning experience. The students expected the lecturer to comment on the content of the discussion, while it was taking place, so that they knew whether they were on the right track. Ting and Gonzalez [38] compared student evaluations of a face-to-face class of counsellor education with a hybrid class which was mainly online, but with some face-to-face meetings. Both groups of students commented that instructor facilitation enhanced their learning.

In a study [39] of an online discussion forum additional to the face-to-face classroom, where the professor did not participate in the online discussion, the students' responses were assessed and it was found that the majority of postings could be classified as representing medium level thinking skills of analysing and applying their knowledge. The few who reached higher level thinking skills (synthesis and evaluation), were able to combine what they were learning with their prior knowledge to create new ideas and perceptions. The lack of professor participation and encouragement may have been a factor

in not many students gaining the higher level thinking skills in their postings.

Volery and Lord [40] identify three critical factors: technology (ease of access and navigation, interface design and level of interaction); the instructor (attitude towards students, instructor technical competence and classroom interaction); student characteristics such as the previous use of the technology. The paper concludes that the level of interaction between the students and the instructor is important in online delivery.

The empirical research (which was carried out by means of a response analysis of student evaluation questionnaires completed by the Birkbeck face-to-face students and the Liverpool online LLM students in March 2014) done by this author indicates that for an effective online discussion forum, instructor presence in the classroom and active participation in the discussion is extremely important to enable the students to have a good learning experience. If it is only students participating in the discussion, posting on the forum and commenting on each other's posts, they would not know whether they have understood the topic and whether they are on the right track. They need to have confidence that the instructor is not only reading their posts, but will inform them if they have misunderstood a key concept or a principle. As regards skills development, interaction between instructor and student in the form of feedback will enable students to develop skills such as written communication and critical thinking. The very essence of the development of collaborative skills is interaction between students.

8. Embedding Employability Skills and Ethical Awareness at the London School of Business and Management Law School

At the commencement of the academic year 2014/15, the law team decided to embed employability skills and ethical awareness in the law curriculum. In the induction session, the students were informed of the importance of employability skills and ethical awareness in increasing their chances of finding employment and retaining employment once they got a job. At the first meeting of the Student Law Society which was a workshop on careers, again the students were informed that they should make use of the opportunities to develop their employability skills and ethical awareness throughout the degree course, in the classroom, while doing assessment, research, etc. Students were encouraged to develop their leadership skills by volunteering to be office bearers in the Student Law Society. Students were given the opportunity to practice oral communication and teamwork skills in the seminars. Also they were encouraged to develop research skills by doing the preparation for the seminars and by doing the research for assessed coursework. Online discussion forums were created in all the modules and students were encouraged each week to reflect on the employability skills and ethical awareness developed that week and record their thoughts in the online discussion forum.

Their written communication skills were also developed in encouraging posts to the discussion forum, setting formative written work as well as the assessed coursework.

Oral communication skills were further developed when all the students had to take part in an assessed moot for one of the modules. The particular professional legal skill of drafting skeleton arguments was also tested in this module.

Time management was developed when students had to submit coursework for the various modules, where the deadlines were close to each other.

The skills were developed by blended learning, in and out of the classroom and online.

At the end of the year the students were aware of the skills they had to develop to gain employment, the extent to which they were developed and the areas they needed to improve.

9. Discussion and Conclusions

Employers require graduates who not only have the knowledge needed for the job, but also have the skills to assist them to satisfactorily perform their roles in the work place. There are numerous employability skills. Only some of these can be taught in a face-to-face teaching environment, while only some skills can be learnt in a purely online learning environment. The way forward is blended learning which is a learning environment consisting of a combination of face-to-face and online learning.

For the development of employability skills and the learning of discipline-specific knowledge and skills, the blended learning system has to be an effective system. An effective blended learning system should not only consist of web learning resources to enable students to develop employability skills through independent learning. It should also consist of an online discussion forum integrated with the face-to-face teaching. The online discussion forum is based on collaborative learning, collaboration between employees being vital to a well-functioning organisation. To be effective, the online discussion forum should not only have students who interact with each other, but also instructors/facilitators who interact with the students. Indeed, for the development of employability skills the guidance of instructors/facilitators is essential.

There is no doubt that actual work experience while following a degree course and a module on careers planning and skills development would be useful to students while undertaking their degree course. However, employability skills cannot be developed over a limited period of time. The development of employability skills should be a core objective of each module in the degree programme. Students should be given the opportunity of developing the key employability skills by each higher education institution adopting an effective system of blended learning as the essence of the institutional teaching/learning strategy.

Statement of Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests.

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