

'Leading a regional and rural Australian law school'

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Introduction

'The tyranny of distance'. This description is rather apt when it comes to an institution like Southern Cross University that has multi-campus spanning across a footprint immediately south of the border of Queensland deep into the mid-coast of New South Wales in Australia.¹ Added to this challenge is the delivery of programs via distance education when students are virtually everywhere, onshore and offshore. I shall choose, therefore, to focus on one point alone: digital education as a means of flexible delivery and the challenge it poses to the role of deaning internally in effecting change in the educational environment of the Law School.

Digital Education

The use of digital technology has assumed increasing prominence in recent times. In the case of a regional and rural law school, its use is one of necessity. It is ridiculous to think of a student travelling two-and-a-half hours each way for a one-hour lecture or even a two-hour seminar. It is also practically impossible to expect each and every one of such regional and rural students to re-locate to where the law school is. Furthermore, Southern Cross University is located in the most underprivileged geographical region of the socio-economic groups of Australia. Finding technological means in teaching delivery as an added measure to the traditional classroom delivery is, therefore, essential.

However, in a sense, the tables have turned. It is submitted that what has begun as a 'necessity' will, in the future, be one of 'choice', as we move towards our increasingly Digital Age. The young generations of today are a product of a consumerist culture that hungers for the next best thing in technology. Very soon, our school-leavers will know no better than just using technology in learning. To the children of the digital generation, digital education and distance education has become a natural convergence in tertiary education delivery. In a very short time, the landscape has shifted. The cohorts are blurred and blended. Teaching effectively in a virtual environment fulfils the needs of both internal and external students. At this juncture, I shall turn to the concept of 'Converged or Blended Teaching Delivery' in the discipline of law.

Converged or Blended Teaching Delivery

The notion of a converged or blended teaching delivery² seeks to create an educational environment, ideally, where no distinction is made between internal and external students,

particularly in an instance where the institution is a distance education provider, like Southern Cross University is. It may be interesting to use the School of Law and Justice, Southern Cross University, as a case study.

We commenced external delivery of our LLB degree course several years ago. At that time, extensive study guides were produced (which continue to be produced) with hard copies provided free of charge to external students, and internal students given access to print at their own costs. Both cohorts were given electronic access via Blackboard. In 2006, lecture podcasts were piloted in a few units and very well-received by the external students. The internal students liked the idea, too, as the podcasts gave them an opportunity to go over what they might have missed at real-time. It also gave the opportunity to those internal students who missed classes to be able to catch up. Following such a successful trial, the School implemented podcasts across the board in 2007. Each of the lecturers was given an mp3 to record her or his classes for uploading onto Blackboard.

At about this time, a Business colleague engaged in a Canadian software called '*Illuminate*'³ which was, in 2007, implemented by the University as a companion teaching tool on Blackboard. Some Law academics have started to experiment with *Illuminate*.

Last year, 'Second Life'⁴ was introduced to the School, although no one as yet has engaged in it as a teaching and learning tool. However, I am aware of a seeming interest amongst colleagues.

As we can see, technology will keep churning out newer and newer ways of doing things. The challenge is to keep up! Training the trainers becomes a *fait accompli*. It is also easy to lose sight of what we do, in the midst of fancy gadgets. The challenge is also not to forget that technology is here to *supplement* teaching, not to *supplant* it. In the end, pedagogy and technology need to be bedfellows.

As we can see, the ideas contained in converged or blended delivery are varied, and subject always to constant improvement. The decanal challenge, first and foremost, is to convince the Law academics to embrace technology at the psychological level. I say at the psychological level because I have found that managing change, and managing it effectively, has almost always been initially experienced at the psychological level before the technical or material levels. It is no surprise that whenever changes are mooted, we face staff resistance. Introducing the idea of flexible delivery via the concept of converged or blended teaching is no mean feat as it requires a paradigm shift in ways of thinking and doing. What more with the challenge of handling technology!

I must say, with some comfort, and certainly with staff willingness and co-operation, the School is making headway in this direction.⁵ I think it is also the right direction, given what I have stated at the outset, i.e. digital education which, for our institution, is a matter of necessity will, very soon, be a matter of choice for the digital generation of learners. To conclude, leading change in a rural and regional law school in Australia has been a challenging and enriching decanal experience. I expect it to be no different elsewhere.

¹ Southern Cross University has campuses in the State of New South Wales in Lismore, Tweed Gold Coast and Coffs Harbour. A new campus is currently under construction on the Gold Coast in the State of Queensland, and it is expected to be operational in 2010. Law programs are offered at both Lismore and Tweed Gold Coast, with the LLB expected to be offered at the new Gold Coast campus in 2010.

² See, for instance, D. Randy Garrison and Norman D. Vaughan, *Blended Learning in Higher Education: framework, principles, and guidelines*, John Wiley & Sons, 2007.

³ The website is www.illuminate.com

⁴ The website is www.secondlife.com

⁵ Last year, the School was awarded a Vice-Chancellor's Teaching and Learning Fellowship to research 'Blended Teaching Delivery in Law'. Four Law units have been selected as part of the pilot in this research project.