

**LAW LEARNING IN ACTION: AN ACTION LEARNING PROJECT TO EVALUATE PROCESSES
AND OUTCOMES OF USING LAW E-LEARNING OBJECTS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

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1. Introduction

Law is a core component of social work education in all 4 countries of the UK. Research into how it is taught and assessed¹ revealed widely varying approaches, and a perception (shared between students and educators) that law is difficult; the use of e-learning was minimal. The present research, funded by the Social Care Institute for Excellence, evaluated the processes and outcomes of using a suite of e-learning objects² in law teaching on social work degree programmes. The evaluation tracked a group of educators in 6 universities as they engaged in collaborative capacity building³ over 2½ years, participating in a learning set designed to support engagement with the law e-learning objects and to develop skills in evaluating their outcomes for students.

2. Methodology

The research sought to explore how educators used the law e-learning objects in their teaching; how students and educators alike experienced their use; what processes and challenges arose; what outcomes resulted for student learning. The dual nature of the focus is shown in Figure 1.

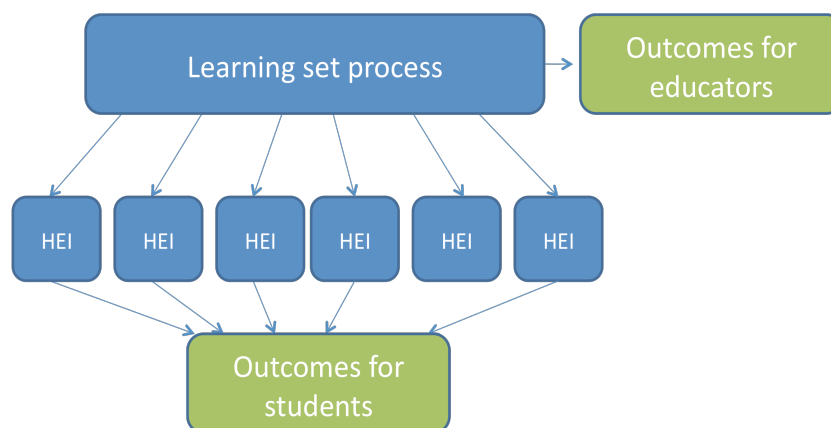
Collaborative capacity building is characterized by peer learning through participation in an action learning set, with specialist support, advice and mentoring. Learning set meetings took place throughout the 2½ years, exploring the processes, challenges and outcomes of using and evaluating the SCIE law e-learning objects.

¹ Braye, S. and Preston-Shoot, M. with Cull, L-A, Johns, R. and Roche, J. (2005) *Knowledge Review 8: Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Law in Social Work Education*. London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.

² <http://www.scie.org.uk/publications/elearning/law/index.asp> The e-learning objects were developed by a project team led by SCIE, with the content provided by two of the present authors, and published in 2007.

³ Burgess, H. and Carpenter, J. (2008) 'Building capacity and capability for evaluating the outcomes of social work education (the OSWE project): creating a culture change', *Social Work Education*, 27, 8, 898-912.

Figure 1: Dual focus of the study on outcomes and processes for educators and students



Changes in educator orientation to e-learning were tracked using questionnaires⁴ at the start, middle and end of the project. Reflective diary entries and interviews with educators sought reflections on the experience of collaborative capacity building and its perceived outcomes. Student questionnaires⁵ were used before and after law teaching for two consecutive cohorts in each HEI, to identify orientation to e-learning, perceptions of the utility of different modes of learning, and changes in confidence in law knowledge. Student focus groups sought student perceptions of e-learning in their law module. Throughout, the learning set received input from two critical friends to support the development of capacity in evaluating outcomes of educational interventions and in embedding e-learning in the law curriculum. Ethical approval for the study was gained from research ethics committees at the Universities of Bedfordshire and Sussex and, where necessary, from the participating universities.

3. The teaching interventions

Over the two years of teaching, educators use the e-learning objects in a number of ways:

- Students accessed the e-learning objects as they wished during their private study time
- Tutors directed students to specified e-learning objects during private study time;
- Students worked on e-learning objects in small group clusters during class time;
- Educators used specific e-learning objects during lectures to the whole student group;
- Completion of specific e-learning objects was required as part of student assessment.

⁴ Panda, S. and Mishra, S. (2007) 'E-Learning in a Mega Open University: Faculty attitude, barriers and motivators', *Educational Media International*, 44:4, 323 — 338; Liaw, Shu-Sheng, Huang, Hsiu-Mei and Chen, Gwo-Dong (2007) 'Surveying instructor and learner attitudes toward e-learning', *Computers & Education* 49 (2007) 1066–1080.

⁵ Liaw, Shu-Sheng, Huang, Hsiu-Mei and Chen, Gwo-Dong (2007) 'An activity-theoretical approach to investigate learners' factors toward e-learning systems', *Computers in Human Behavior*, 23, 1906–1920; and custom-built questions on modes of learning and confidence in law knowledge, for which no published alternatives could be located.

4. Research Findings

(a) Educators' experience of the learning set process

Educators teaching law to social work students were deeply committed to their subject, but experienced isolation. Making links for students between law and its practice application was seen as the core goal of teaching, but a challenging one; creativity and innovation in teaching were vital to engaging interest and overcoming fears. The learning set was seen as a way of capturing space and support to experiment with e-learning as an innovation which had a significant future but in which knowledge and confidence were not well established. Building capacity in evaluating outcomes was a more secondary motivation.

Positive experiences in the learning set were its contribution to:

- Motivation to engage and continue with innovation;
- Shared learning and support with that learning;
- Breaking down feelings of isolation with the responsibility of law teaching;
- More positive views of e-learning and greater confidence in using it;
- Empowerment to make changes of approach to teaching law, perhaps taking risks to try new things and find a more personally satisfying experience of teaching;
- Embedding e-learning within the curriculum and enhancing learning modes for students;
- Development of a researcher identity.

Less positive processes were:

- Insufficient lead in time to use and experiment with the e-learning objects and to develop the familiarity needed to decide where and how to use them;
- The diversity of teaching interventions being made, resulting in participants being at different stages when the learning set met, making commonality harder to establish;
- Tension between the flexibility accorded to participants (in how the e-learning objects were used, and in the approaches taken to evaluating outcomes) and later recognition of the benefits of greater standardisation in tracking student outcomes⁶.

Barriers to implementing e-learning strategies were experienced, particularly in the early stages. These included difficulty securing appropriate resources within the HEIs (notably the reliability and range of technology/technology support), lack of confidence in engaging with technology, securing ethical approvals, and pressures of time leading to reliance on tried and tested approaches. Over time these challenges were addressed and participants were able to implement their teaching plans.

By the end of the learning set, the educators showed increase experience of and confidence in using e-learning. Changes of belief in the utility of e-learning were less apparent, but had

⁶ The quantifiable student outcomes element of the study has in fact been extended for the academic year 2010-2011, providing the opportunity to refine the content of the questionnaire and standardize its use across the participating institutions. Three additional HEIs are taking part, bringing the total to 9. Thus it is anticipated that data from a considerably larger matched cohort will be available once the extended project is complete in the summer of 2011.

been well established to start with; the learning set attracted people who were interested in e-learning and believed in its potential efficacy. Whilst these positive beliefs endured, what improved was confidence. This was not, however, always accompanied by increased satisfaction with, or enjoyment of, the use of e-learning. Exposure to the complexities, both pedagogic and practical, of embedding the learning objects in a blended learning approach may have provoked more critical appraisal of satisfaction levels later in the project.

(b) Educators' experiences of using the law e-learning objects

Learning set members were enthusiastic about many aspects of the law e-learning objects. They:

- Add variety to a teaching session, changing the content and pace;
- Allow options and variety for students with different learning styles;
- Are accessible, with good signposting and a clear sequence of learning built in;
- Are interactive, requiring students to make choices and decisions;
- Give students feedback on the choices they make;
- Can be used to consolidate, reinforce and test learning;
- Stimulate debate, linking law to contemporary events, connecting law to practice;
- Give students confidence.

Equally they were critical of other aspects. The e-learning objects can be:

- Clumsy sometimes to navigate;
- Too long, and insufficiently fragmented into 'bite sized chunks';
- Visually unpleasing. Simple cartoon drawings were considered inappropriate and a strong preference for photos and alternative graphics was expressed;
- Difficult to explore in relation to specific areas of law, because each object integrates several. Thus students cannot easily isolate content relating to specific topics and educators struggle to fit particular objects to more segmented curriculum content;
- Difficult to link to different stages of student learning. The level of learning addressed is not specified and each contains both simple and complex material;
- Sometimes unbalanced in content (for example in the range of service user and carer perspectives represented in the video interviews).

Other developments that would be valued include refinements such as:

- A glossary and an index, indicating where specific content may be found;
- Some means of tracking students' use of the e-learning objects;
- More explicit ways of linking the objects to student assessment tasks; student engagement is stronger when learning is seen to support assessment performance.

(c) Outcomes for student learning

The results reported here from analysis of student questionnaire responses are based on a matched sample of 143 students.

(i) Findings on modes of learning

The majority of students were positive about the teaching methods used in their social work law modules, rating them as 'very useful' or 'useful'. The top five methods (lectures,

directed written materials, case studies, independent use of written materials and outside speakers/experts) were rated 'very useful' or 'useful' by between 96% and 99% of participants. The lowest rated mode of learning was independent e-learning, but this was still considered useful or very useful by 85% of respondents. Age was a factor here; 89.9% of the mature students said that it was useful or very useful, compared to 74.1% of the non-mature students. E-learning in the classroom was rated more positively; 86% of participants rated class based e-learning as very useful or useful - but still appears relatively low on the popularity list in comparison with the traditional approaches.

(ii) Findings on students' confidence in knowledge and skills in relation to law

A group of 5 questions measured the learners' confidence in understanding and learning about the relationship between law and social work. Students' confidence increased between the start and the end of their law learning, showing a significant, moderate effect⁷.

A group of 18 questions measured students' confidence in their knowledge of law and its application in a range of areas. Responses before and after teaching were compared. There was movement between most of the means, and some of these were significant. Some (4 questions) showed a negative effect, where participants felt less confident when their course finished than when it began ("consulting lawyers", "assessing risks and needs", "working in partnership with service users and carers", and "using legal and positional authority in an anti-oppressive way"). Although the effect was very small for the last three, there was a small significant downturn to "consulting lawyers"⁸. The decreases may be attributable to a more sophisticated understanding of these challenges after the teaching and thus less confidence than earlier. Four questions showed a significant improvement in confidence; in 2 of these the effect was small ("recording according to standards laid out in guidance and case law", "managing the relationship between law and social work values") while 2 showed a moderate effect ("identifying legal rules" and "applying legal rules to cases").

(ii) Findings on students' experience of computers and attitudes to e-learning

Questions exploring students' levels of experience of using computer technologies⁹ demonstrated only no statistically significant changes. All three of these questions did show a rise in mean across time, and all scored highly initially. In a set of questions testing respondents' views about e-learning as a learning environment, only 1 question showed any significant change ("I can read the online instructions actively"); this is more likely to be linked to the use of the e-learning objects. A final question asked learners whether they thought online learning was of equal quality to traditional classroom teaching. Although there was no significant change over the means of the two time periods, there was a distinct shift in opinion towards more favorable views of e-learning's value at Time 2.

(b) Student experiences of using the e-learning objects

The findings from the student focus groups cast light upon perceptions of law learning in general, as well as on blended learning, and the SCIE law e-learning objects in particular.

⁷ A matched T-test was used in order to ascertain whether the differences were statistically significant.

⁸ A matched T-test was used in order to ascertain whether differences were statistically significant.

⁹ These questions were tested for reliability using a Cronbach Reliability test, and one question ('I am experienced coding Web pages') was eliminated.

(i) *Student attitudes to law learning*

Students anticipated law learning with a variety of emotion, including anxiety (even fear) and felt overwhelmed by the breadth and depth of learning. Legal language is perceived as inaccessible and the interface between law and social work as complex and fluid. However, some students had looked forward to law teaching and learning; law was perceived as giving practitioners authority, and useful to them as advocates and guardians of human rights.

The fearfully anticipated experiences had not always materialized. Making law accessible and connecting it to practice had enabled students 'learn the language', to acquire confidence and overcome their antipathy. Law learning had begun to instill a sense of authority, accountability and legitimation. It had also provided knowledge with which to empower service users and carers, articulating their rights and the local authority's responsibilities. This in itself enhanced confidence. Against this, the breadth and depth of knowledge required continued to daunt.

Students commented that effective teaching involved bringing the subject alive. Case studies, input by practitioners, and use of the law e-learning objects that focus on 'real people', were all techniques through which learning could have an enduring impact. Practice learning was seen as helpful (although placements lacked explicit law focus) and students wanted law to be embedded in all levels of their degree, not just in one stand alone module.

(ii) *Student perspectives on the law e-learning objects*

Positive aspects of e-learning and the law e-learning objects in particular were seen as:

- The ways in which they bring learning alive and make connections to real cases;
- The use of news stories and cases based on real events, or video clips with real people, which had an emotional impact which enhanced learning;
- Short, bite-sized chunks of learning so that students can dip in and dip out;
- Objects in which student interaction is required;
- Tutor input and direction on what objects to look at, when and why, particularly focusing on how the object would support learning on any individual legal topic;
- Use of objects in class to stimulate discussion, followed by individual study time;
- Using the objects themselves to track and benchmark their level of understanding. Thus they were particularly useful at revision times prior to examinations;
- Objects which provide feedback on rights answers and explain why;
- Objects in which content is clearly badged and well signposted;
- A mix of styles within the objects – some real cases, some fictitious scenarios, some games – to account for student preferences.

Less positive view expressed included:

- A call for more support early on in developing the necessary computer literacy;
- The discouraging impact of some technical challenges (using audio in computer labs; streaming videos on slow internet connections);
- Concern that e-learning can encourage surface rather than deep learning (through merely learning the right answers through guesswork and/or repetition);
- Preference for learning that allows discussion and interaction with other people;

- Being put off by the visual appearance of the law e-learning objects, in particular the cartoon characters which felt like being back at school;
- Difficulty with objects that were less easy to break down into short, component parts and therefore took too long to complete or were left unfinished;
- Frustration with several pages of text to be read before any interaction is required;
- Difficulty identifying how easy or difficult an object was intended to be, and single objects containing both simplistic and complex material at the same time;
- Being given optional rather than mandated use of the objects, implying they were a less important aspect of learning that could be dispensed with if time was pressured;
- Perceived gaps in content, legal issues which were not covered by any of the objects.

Overall the e-learning objects had helped students develop confidence in their knowledge. Students compared the relative merits of e-learning and books; books could be read anywhere, and had an index to help locate content; for some they retained greater academic credibility; reading and note taking was an enjoyable activity. But books were also heavy, voluminous and off-putting. The e-learning objects made learning fun and more immediately interesting; the text boxes, presenting information in a condensed and ordered way, made law more accessible for some than books where there was so much more to take in. The objects could be even more useful if they offered the facility to print out evidence of learning because this helped identify the knowledge covered. Students liked the SCIE website, finding it accessible and helpful; through using the law objects they had discovered other useful resources.

Students acknowledged, after the event, that they had learnt something about law; they had an emerging sense of their authority and confidence to challenge what they see in practice. They were beginning to learn a language. However, there was insufficient time, generally and in the classroom, to deal with the breadth and depth of required knowledge. Learning that is perceived as insufficient can decrease confidence and students here looked to their practice learning to pick up further learning about the application of law in practice.

(c) Conclusions

(i) The law e-learning objects as a contributor to students' law learning

The findings from educators and students demonstrate the processes involved and the challenges confronted in using the law e-learning objects. Anxiety and lack of confidence – for the students in relation to law, and for both in e-learning – have been balanced by enthusiasm for innovation. Most students and all the educators, whilst able to make suggestions for improvement of the e-learning objects, have found them helpful and supportive of law learning, offering a different and complementary experience to other learning approaches. Students like learning that is visual and interactive, with the topic brought alive and clarified by practice examples. E-learning clearly strikes a chord here, making a key contribution that reinforces other modes of learning.

Students recognise that individual lecturers make a meaningful difference to their law learning through their communication and interaction skills, their passion for the subject, and their use of their own and others' practice experience to bring teaching alive. Because of the impact of lecturer approaches, students were quick to follow an enthusiastic lead to the e-learning objects from their lecturer. Students preferred e-learning that took place,

whether in class or independently, under the guidance of the tutor, with the opportunity to discuss understandings that have been reached.

Bringing together the key themes from both the students' and the educators' data provides the opportunity to identify three key messages that will enable social work education to move forward with e-learning generally and more specifically with use of the social work law e-learning objects.

- The first is about blending the learning and the exploiting the learning modes used. E-learning brings an additional dimension that is appreciated for its visual impact, affective impact, clarity, accessibility, and interactivity. Careful thought to what the medium offers, and what messages it can most effectively carry, is essential in mixing the blend for any given group of students.
- The second is about embedding e-learning objects in the learning strategy. The e-learning objects were most effective when embedded as core elements of the overall approach, alongside other activities and learning tasks located under the direction and guidance of the tutor, presenting e-learning as providing explicit added value rather than an optional extra.
- The third is about engaging with complexity. Key here is signposting what each e-learning object offers and constructing objects for different levels of student experience. Careful layering of content within individual objects also helps build up levels, so that students can have choice about the depth of their learning and can build deeper knowledge on strong foundations.

(ii) Collaborative capacity building

The learning set has given set members a better understanding of e-learning and greater confidence in blending different media together in the teaching of law to social work students. Participation in the set has provided an essential bedrock through the innovation process and has consistently both coordinated and motivated implementation of the project in the member HEIs.

Early discussions focused on the challenges of embedding the e-learning objects within the law teaching. As the learning set progressed, the discussions focused on planning and implementing strategies in each HEI, often providing a cross fertilisation of ideas. As knowledge of the e-learning objects deepened, educators were more challenged by the process of linking them clearly to student learning objectives. Responsiveness to students' experiences of learning was strong, and triggered iterative engagement with solving problems and/or fine-tuning the pedagogic approaches used.

For most members of the learning set, evaluating the outcomes of social work education was a new activity, one which required transferring in of, or new engagement with, knowledge and understanding of research methods. This was experienced at times as a steep learning curve, and one which benefited from the iterative nature of the study design, offering the opportunity to experiment, test and refine approaches over time. This has afforded valuable learning about both single site and cross-institutional studies and provided a strong foundation for building capacity to secure robust evidence of the outcomes of social work education.