Using Technology to Support Discussions on Sensitive Topics in the Study of Business Ethics

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Abstract

There is a dearth of research into teaching strategies and learning approaches for units involving sensitive topics that can provoke an emotional response in students. In a business ethics unit, attempts to strike a balance between conceptual knowledge and theory and skills training can be challenging because the unit can involve personal, sensitive or controversial topics. When engaging in deep and meaningful face-to-face discussion, students may unknowingly divulge personal opinions that they later regret or become identified with by other students over time. Value-laden topics may also lead to clashes between students if face-to-face discussions are not managed properly. This paper considers the use of technology in blended learning to provide an optimal learning environment for student discussion on sensitive topics via role-play and simulation in a first-year business ethics unit. The Audience Response System (ARS), online discussion boards and blogs, and wikis are assessed for their suitability in supporting online role-play and simulation. Among these online tools, asynchronous online discussion boards and blogs are the ideal tools for supporting student discussion on sensitive topics in online role-play and simulation.

Keywords: Sensitive topics, student participation, student engagement, online role play, simulation, anonymity.

Introduction

Australian educational institutions traditionally play a significant role in producing graduates with capabilities that are required by employers and stakeholders for building corporate sustainability in a competitive business environment, and by governments for meeting the future needs of the Australian community and economy. These institutions have been expected to produce qualified or job-ready graduates equipped with an array of appropriate skills including analytical, communication (verbal, written and presentation), time management, critical thinking, interpersonal, listening and decision-making skills. The scandalous collapses in ethics of management executives and businesses such as HIH, Enron and WorldCom have triggered calls for inclusion of business ethics units in business curricula (Bandyk, 2010; Hesseldenz, 2012; Holland & Albrecht, 2013; Floyd, Xu, Atkins, & Caldwell, 2013; O'Flaherty & Doyle, 2014; Sigurjonsson, Vaiman, & Arnardottir, 2014; Wart, Baker, & Ni, 2014). Consequently, educators are now increasingly expected to produce graduates with job-ready skills that also include capabilities in ethical decision making and handling of ethical dilem-

mas for their careers and lives as socially responsible individuals. Ethics refers to standards of conduct, based on moral principles, such as avoiding harming others, that are established to guide people in their conduct and behaviour (Dellaportas, Thomsen, & Conyon, 2012). Ethical behavior is concerned with how we live our lives and relate to other members of our society. Discussions on educational institutions as active agents in influencing or inculcating professional behavior and ethical conduct have led to accreditation bodies (such as the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business [AACSB] and the European Foundation for Management Development [EFMD]) calling for the inclusion of ethics in business curricula, and professional bodies (such as Chartered Financial Analyst [CFA] and Certified Public Accountants [CPA]) counting ethics as a compulsory unit for completion in their professional qualification programs. While there has been some doubt as to whether ethics can be 'taught' in university curricula (Korn, 2013; Martin, 1981; Miller & Miller, 1976), there has been stronger support from the literature suggesting that it can (Brady & Hart, 2007, Desplaces, Melchar, Beauvais, & Bosco, 2007; Reynolds, 2006; Sims, 2002; Slocum, Rohlfer, & Gonzalez-Canton, 2014;Weber, 1990). Recent research has shown that students benefit from learning ethics. A study by May, Luth, and Schwoerer (2013) found that ethics education enhances student awareness and sensitivity to ethical concerns, and also equips them with the skills and confidence to deal with ethical issues and dilemmas. Gu and Neesham's (2014) controlled study showed that students who had studied ethics possessed higher levels of ethical decision-making than students who had not.

Opinions also vary on how ethics should be included in business schools' learning curricula, whether it should be an embedded topic across different units or a stand-alone unit in the curriculum (Holland & Albrecht, 2013; Nelson, Smith, & Hunt, 2013; Sigurjonsson et al., 2014; Slocum et al., 2014; Wart et al., 2014). Floyd et al. (2014) noted that business ethics experts recommend stand-alone ethics units and the use of case studies for developing ethical decision making skills and effective handling of ethical issues. Slocum et al. (2014), on the other hand, found inconclusive evidence of the effectiveness of standalone ethics units in their literature review. However, they recommended 'micro-insertions' (which are small-scale insertions of ethics instructions) in the teaching of ethics, regardless of whether ethics is taught as a standalone unit or integrated across the curriculum. Effective teaching of ethics is dependent upon the teaching strategies and practices used to achieve the learning outcome. Waples, Antes, Murphy, Connelly, and Mumford (2009), using a meta-analysis of business ethics education research, found that different ethics programs aim for different outcomes. Further research is required to determine the types of teaching strategies and practices that are most effective for teaching business ethics.

It is not the intent of this paper to identify whether ethics should be taught as a stand-alone unit in the curriculum or integrated across the curriculum. Rather, it examines and evaluates the use of technology for online role-play and simulation in the discussion of sensitive or controversial topics in a business ethics unit taught to first-year university students. The unit under review adopts a blended learning approach that utilizes face-to-face and online delivery, and in which online role-play and simulation are two of the learning techniques utilized.

Student Engagement

Teachers in Australia have been encouraged to adopt innovative teaching practices to foster an effective approach for producing the next generation of professionals or skilled workers, as evidenced by the grant schemes from current and former prominent government agencies such as the Office of Learning and Teaching (2011 to current), Australian Learning and Teaching Council (2008 to 2011) and Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (2004 to 2008). One of the desired outcomes from innovative teaching practices is student engagement, which has been identified as an important prerequisite for effective learning. Student engagement has been identified in government policies as critical for advancing quality in higher education

(Radloff and Coates, 2013). Coates (2008, p. iv) defines student engagement as "students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning". Students learn by being involved and they learn best and acquire skills when they are engaged (Astin, 1985; Department of Education, Science and Training, 2010). They also learn more effectively and retain information better when they are actively engaged with topics, issues and/or problems compared to passive, lecture-based instruction (Micheletto, 2011). Positive results from student engagement have been associated with better student retention (Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008), higher academic performance (Pascarella, Seifert, & Blaich, 2010), high-quality learning outcomes (Krause & Coates, 2008), and higher student satisfaction (Radloff & Coates, 2013). Overall, greater student engagement has been associated with advanced graduate capabilities, including skill in ethical decision making, and is an important contributing factor to enhancing the quality of education (Coates, 2008).

Student Engagement and Blended Learning

Increasingly, universities are utilising information and communications technologies (ICT) in blended learning strategies to engage students by enriching the quality of their learning. Blended learning integrates learning in a traditional classroom environment (face-to-face setting) with online or e-learning. Examples of e-learning options include accessing learning and support resources through the university's Learning Management System (LMS) such as podcasts and post-lecture audio recordings for student review, online formative assessment, posting and sharing of student comments and discussion through discussion boards, blogs, virtual classrooms and wikis, and using online journals and ePortfolios for reflective practice. Research studies have shown that a suitable blend of face-to-face and online learning can enhance students' learning experience and engagement (Chen, Lambert, & Guidry, 2010; Delialioglu, 2011; Dukes, Waring, & Koorland, 2006; Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez, & Rodriguez-Ariza, 2011; Matinez-Caro & Campuzano-Balorin, 2011). It has been noted that academics tend to refer to educational research from their own disciplines for designing blended learning in their curriculum (Arbaugh, 2014). Bliuc, Goodyear, and Ellis (2007) conducted a review of studies conducted on blended learning in higher education, from which they identified educationally useful research as that which focuses on the relationships between different modes of learning as well as how these modes are integrated to support student learning. However, limited research in blended learning strategies for certain disciplines, such as the study of ethics, would mean that curriculum developers in such disciplines face a challenge in selecting the mix of online learning tools and formats that best optimizes blended learning for quality outcome within the constraints of their environment. The appropriate blend of face-to-face and online learning can vary from one context to another and depends not only on pedagogy, content and discipline of study but also on the attitude of the students. For example, Wong and Fong's study (2014) emphasizes the importance of taking student attitudes to traditional and online methods of delivery into consideration when designing or considering blended learning. Because of contextual differences, the findings of some studies may not be easily generalized for effective course design and implementation. This paper attempts to identify learning strategies and techniques that can be integrated into online learning format (blended learning) to support discussion on sensitive issues in the study of business ethics.

Learning Ethics and Sensitive Topics

Training in ethical decision making is a critical part of preparing students for their future profession and career. Resolving ethical dilemmas requires empathy and perceptive skills besides critical thinking and interpersonal skills. Remisova, Lasakova, and Buciova (2014) concluded from their review of the literature that good ethics units in business education should develop ethical awareness in students sensitize them to their personal perceptions and help them to develop a

sense of empathy towards others in order to see the complexities involved and how their decisions and actions influence others; and, lastly, develop their analytical ability, moral reasoning and judgmental abilities. However, to date little has been published on empirical research in regard to the blend of instructional strategies and approaches in teaching ethics to business students.

In a business ethics unit, the attempt to strike a balance between conceptual knowledge and theory with skills training can be challenging because such a unit can involve personal, sensitive or controversial topics and may prompt students to divulge personal opinions in order to engage in deep and meaningful discussion. Problems may occur when there has been too frequent self-disclosure (for example, too deeply personal views being offered in the discussion), which students may later regret or which other students may identify with them with in the long term (Pope, 2000). It may also become a formidable challenge in a classroom where students come from diverse backgrounds and their views and opinions are rooted in cultural values and beliefs. These values and beliefs can affect ethical decision-making because different cultures have different ethical standards and practices (Bartels, 1967; Fischer, 2006; Nill & Shultz, 1997; Nonis & Swift, 2001; Zheng, Gray, Zhu, & Jiang, 2014). In classroom group activities, value clashes may occur among students in their face-to-face interaction with one another (Fleischmann. Robbins, & Wallace, 2009; Pope, 2000). Students may respond emotionally to topics and potentially cause distress within the group if they perceive the class as unfriendly and non-inclusive and if such conflicts are not properly managed. This could trigger a reluctance to participate in future group discussions. The instructor may also find it difficult to strike a balance between urging participation and denying some students the right to voice their values and opinions. However, this does not mean that curricula should not involve students in discussing sensitive topics. Pope (2000) argued that a topic that explores one's values in discussion or reflection can contribute to critical thinking ability, which constitutes an important element in the learning process. If properly managed, culturally-based ethical standard clashes can be avoided. Group discussion can help to achieve the learning outcome of a good ethics unit by helping students to identify their personal values and understand how their values affect the decisions they make. It also shows students how their counterparts might approach the same situation from different ethical perspectives in reasoning and decision-making. Because group discussion can be used to identify differences in ethical standards and practices from different cultural backgrounds, it can be further used to enhance each student's awareness of the variations in ethical practices in the global arena. This has implications for the future readiness of these students to handle codes of ethics from different professional organizations and countries. The challenge is to implement a participatory approach in a business ethics unit in which students feel comfortable in sharing or discussing sensitive topics. Creating the right learning environment is important for fostering a sense of belonging within discussion groups and has implications for participation, learning outcomes and student satisfaction rates (Krause & Armitage, 2014; Tinto, 2005).

The Advantages of Simulation and Role-Play

The range of instructional strategies and approaches available for learning business ethics includes lectures, books and articles, case studies, simulation, role-playing, student presentations, group discussions, and portfolio/ journal/learning log (Baker, 2014; May et al., 2013; Nelson et al., 2013). Despite this plethora of options, literature on the effectiveness of instructional strategies for teaching business ethics is scarce. The case study method has been commonly used as an approach for learning ethics (Cheng, 2015) but it tends to involve a linear approach of applying universal ethical principles or standards in resolving ethical dilemmas. Role-play requires each player to assume certain characteristics of another person or a character within structured guidelines related to specific settings. Extending the case studies into role play (in the characters of stakeholders) gives students new insights into the conflicting issues within a context, exposes them to possible options and allows them to experience the consequences of each option, and

raises the awareness of the perspective of different stakeholder roles. According to Ferrell, Fraedrich, and Ferrell (2013), role-play cases can simulate a complex, realistic and timely business ethics situation. Role-play can complement and enhance traditional approaches to business learning experiences because it exposes students to the opportunity of making decisions that have business ethics consequences, can re-create pressure and context similar to the actual situation, supports collaborative problem solving and enriches students' skills and understanding of group processes and dynamics. Role play has also been associated with the advantage of deep learning because it is an innovative way of allowing students to learn the core content and then apply what they have learned (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956; Dracup, 2008; Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). This learning technique can show students that there may be a latent dimension which they may not have initially considered to have a significant effect on their ethical decision making. For example, the power and influence of stakeholders cannot be underestimated, and has been a critical theme in ethical decision-making. Having students taking on roles of different stakeholders in an interactive role-play exercise could make them realize that the private interests of different stakeholders may complicate a seemingly simple ethical issue. In addition, students can broaden their perspective on an argument or issue by switching roles and playing a different character from the one explored previously in the same scenario. In role-play, students also learn as a collaborative group because learning is a social experience and interaction is a critical component in a learning environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Fleischmann et al. (2009) found that group interaction, particularly in a group that brings cultural diversity into the role play, can assist students in understanding multiple perspectives from different cultural backgrounds. The social interaction in the role play can reinforce or challenge the experience or view held by the learner as the group can bring cultural diversity into the role play (Baker, 2014; Clapper, 2010; Fleischmann et al., 2009). The combination of role-play and simulation can further add dynamism to the discussion as scenarios could evolve according to the variety of perspectives participants bring into the role play.

Simulation mimics a real world situation and provides an opportunity for students to apply theoretical knowledge in practice or relate their experience to the theories taught to them. Such a strategy has the advantage of optimizing learning within a short time span (usually within the constraint of class time or teaching semester). Another advantage of simulation is that different paradigms, particularly those that do not frequently occur but can have a significantly devastating impact if they occur in real life, can be configured into the activity. Simulation has been a common learning approach in medical and aviation training. However, Clapper (2010) laments that simulation has not been used widely in general education. Scott, Schumann, and Anderson (1998) noted that business simulations do not explicitly incorporate ethical issues or dilemmas in their focus on marketing, finance and management contexts.

The combination of simulation and role-play can offer a powerful learning experience for students because learning can be consolidated through repeated opportunities to learn and practice. Students exposed to simulated situations in role plays would potentially make the right decisions in similar situations in their future professional lives. As they gain more experience in making decisions, they become more familiar with the tools and structures needed for effective decision-making and their confidence also improves. Furthermore, both these methods can offer a 'safe' environment (as compared to the real environment) for learners to identify what is considered appropriate behavior, and the possible consequences of one's decisions (Alkin & Christie, 2002, p. 211; Baker, 2014, p. 521).

As mentioned earlier in the 'Learning Ethics and Sensitive Topics' section, face-to-face discussion involving sensitive topics in the study of business ethics can become confrontational between students. Hence, face-to-face role-play may not be suitable for more sensitive situations. However the opportunity for group interaction and collaborative problem solving in simulated

role plays is invaluable for supporting deep learning. A collaborative learning approach involves reciprocal learning within the group, as they teach and learn from each other through the sharing of ideas, knowledge and experiences. Successful social interaction and participation are known to lead to internalization (Roschelle, 1995). One way to reap the benefit of collaborative learning inherent in role-play, while at the same time avoiding face-to-face confrontation, is to adopt online role-play for student learning of sensitive content.

Online Tools for Simulation and Role-Play

The author wishes to emphasize that it is not the intent of the business ethics unit under discussion to teach moral standards of behavior, but rather to develop ethical systems of analysis. The unit aims to prepare business students to understand their ethical and moral responsibilities as future business leaders and learn how to handle ethical issues and dilemmas through a standardized approach to ethical reasoning based on professional codes of ethics. A range of professional codes of ethics relevant to the business arena will be used as a guide for decision-making and for comparative study. These codes have been widely accepted as representing immense practical value for practitioners in guiding ethical business decisions and responding to ethical dilemmas in their profession, and will be used for developing students' personal competencies and enhancing knowledge. These professional codes will be used as a mechanism to guide discussion and problem solving through the resolution of complex issues.

In this business ethics unit, students will be exposed to cases that mimic real-world situation in which they take on different roles in a virtual learning environment and are required to use ethical lenses other than their own for framing decisions. Face-to-face role-plays may cause fear and anxiety and become ineffective learning tools when sensitive topics are involved in group discussion. Technology can be used to support group activity in online simulations and role-plays in which students can participate in the discussion of sensitive topics on an anonymous basis. Online anonymity can build confidence as students know their own answers are not individually tracked; their mistakes are made incognito and can result in higher participation rates, thus encouraging interaction and group learning (Connolly, Jessup, & Valacich, 1990; Micheletto, 2011; Tiene, 2000). However, the overall benefits (besides the advantage of online anonymity) of using online simulation and role-play remain inconclusive. In addition, there is a dearth of research on these approaches for units involving sensitive topics. Freeman and Capper (1999) used the web for role-plays by their postgraduate business students in which the identity of the student playing each role was kept anonymous. They found increased participation rates and deeper learning amongst these students. In addition, they attributed the increase in student engagement to the anonymity provided by the online role-play. The asynchronous web-based interaction also provides time for the students to ponder or reflect before submitting a response (Freeman & Capper, 1999). On the other hand, Ludewig and Ludewig-Rohwer (2013) found that deep learning and long-term retention of knowledge learned through online role play in a computer-simulated environment did not occur for students doing German studies at their university. Bell's (2001) study suggests that online role-play is an effective approach for students to explore complex issues from different perspectives. However, students in the online environment were less actively engaged in their roles than those in a classroom environment in the same study.

The purpose of using online role-play in a simulated environment in blended learning for this ethics unit is to help learners internalize knowledge in an authentic way (Douglas & Johnson, 2010). There are different types of software and media that can be used for creating a learning environment that allows student to participate in discussion. However, different technologies offer variable levels of support for different levels of social presence, interactivity and learning format. This paper assesses the suitability of the more popular teaching tools - the Audience Response

System (ARS), online discussion boards, the wiki and online blogs – for supporting group inter-action and discussion on sensitive topics or issues in the teaching of business ethics.

i) Audience Response System (ARS). The ARS has been a popular teaching tool in many higher education institutions and its relevance to online simulation and role-play for this unit should be assessed. An Audience Response System (ARS) is a wireless response system that allows students to participate in class through submitting responses to interactive questions (multiple choice, true/false, yes/no and Likert scale) using a response device previously known as a "clicker" which is a hand-held response pad. Recently, the "clicker" has been replaced by laptops or mobile phones with Internet connectivity. The anonymity afforded by this ARS has resulted in increased participation and interaction in the classroom, giving rise to positive student engagement and an active learning environment (Bode, Drane, Kolikant, & Schuller, 2009; Caldwell, 2007; Graham, Tripp, Seawright, & Joeckel, 2007; Heaslip, Donovan, & Cullen, 2014; Hoekstra, 2008; Hoffman & Goodwin, 2006; Robinson & Ritzko, 2006). The advantage of this system is that it can be used in classes of any size. An ARS can be used for discussion of sensitive topics in the ethics unit, but it can only be used for closed-ended questions in which responses are brief and limited to a list of answer choices. It is not suitable for supporting a learning approach that involves the active interaction and collaborative problem solving that this ethics unit aspires to achieve. However, class responses obtained from an ARS can be an effective feeder for subsequent face-to-face class discussion or a prelude to deeper class participation (Beekes, 2006; Campbell & Monk, 2014).

ii) Online discussion board and blogs. Douglas and Johnson (2010) identified three web-based tools that instructors could use for supporting online role-play in legal study: discussion boards, the wiki and online blogs. Discussion boards and online blogs can be transformed into a synchronous communication tools for classroom discussion on sensitive topics if each student has a tablet PC or mobile phone to access the forum using voice or text. In a well-supported and stable technology infrastructure, this approach could allow discussion to take place in real time, while maintaining anonymity for participants. Wang, Shen, Novak, and Pan (2009) found that using this active and interactive approach via mobile devices improved student engagement in the English study classroom. However, to implement such an approach for this ethics unit all students would have to possess a mobile device in order to have real-time access to the discussion and class interaction. It is impractical to assume that all students can afford a mobile device with Internet connectivity. The student cohort for this first-year ethics unit is typically from a lower socio-economic background and it is not reasonable to hold this assumption. In this business ethics unit, the author intends to use asynchronous online role-plays and simulation for group learning activities relating to sensitive topics to assist students to learn to apply ethical theory to contemporary business dilemma, and for the students to reflect on their values and roles in the community. Students will be able to access computers located in the university's open computer laboratory and library to participate in online role-play through the asynchronous discussion board and online blogs in the university's Learning Management System. Learners will have the opportunity to actively construct knowledge through online role-play in a computer-simulated environment by formulating ideas into words that are shared with and built upon through the reactions and responses of others. The written communications will improve the writing skill of the students, who will be required to articulate clear and explicit ideas, questions, and arguments in their writings. The asynchronous online technology not only provides flexibility in response time for students to explore complex and controversial issues in business ethics decision making, but also allows them to take the time to carefully formulate responses and comments that are not easily misinterpreted as offensive by other students when sensitive topics are involved in the discussion.

Beach and Doerr-Stevens (2009) argued that written communication in online role-play can help students to develop interpersonal and communication skills, especially in terms of writing persua-

sive arguments. This form of interaction also forces students to think their ideas through thoroughly, which in turn sharpened their critical thinking abilities. Thus, online discussion boards and blogs can bring about greater depth, quality and thoughtfulness in role-play. The asynchronous nature of these discussions allowed equitable participation from users. In addition, the relative anonymity and security afforded by these computer-mediated communications technologies helped to overcome the potential anxiety some users' may have encountered in face-to-face role-play. At the same time, these web-based tools offer advantages beyond providing anonymity for students in discussing sensitive topics or issues. For example, each student will be given a fair chance to sharing his/her thoughts and ideas with all others and the instructor can identify from the discussion thread those who have provided their responses or comments on a discussion topic. In a traditional classroom setting, the instructor has to remember which students have already provided a response to a question and those who are yet to do so, which can be challenging for the instructor in an active classroom discussion when the class is big. Passive students (due to their shyness, lack of confidence and/or unpreparedness) may also feel embarrassed if an instructor identifies them for an answer in front of the class in face-to-face learning. This could have a reverse effect when the students feel threatened and may not want to turn up for future classes if they felt unprepared. Using online discussion boards or blogs, an instructor can send a private message through an electronic communication tool such as email to encourage passive student to post their comments, or to find out the reason behind their inertia. Online discussion forums also allow students to post their comments whenever they are ready, whereas students in an active traditional classroom discussion must find an appropriate moment to put forward their comments without being seen as disruptive.

iii) Wikis. Wikis are easily accessible and editable websites and can be employed to support collaborative writing and problem-solving activities (Cunningham, 2001; Pixy Ferris & Wilder, 2006). Editing wiki pages can be opened to the public domain or to a selective group accessible only via a password. However, wikis allow individuals to see who is correcting and modifying their work and thus lack the anonymity that is sought by this business ethics unit. Although wikis have been found to be effective learning tools in increasing knowledge of student in topics that they contributed or edited in this website, it has also been found that students felt uncomfortable in editing the work of others or having their work being edited (Grant, 2006; Lin & Kelsey, 2010; O'Bannon & Britt, 2012). Hence, this online tool may not be suitable for online role-play and simulation in this unit.

In the above assessment of the popular online tools for role-play in a simulated virtual environment, online discussion boards and blogs on an asynchronous platform are considered appropriate for supporting group interaction and discussion on sensitive topics or issues in the learning of business ethics. Although this paper focuses on identifying an appropriate online tool for role-play and simulation in blended learning, other online tools such as ejournals or ePortfolios will also be used for student learning in this ethics unit. Learners will be encouraged to reflect on their learning experience, their self-reflections will be integrated through weekly ejournal entries and they will be able to review their online discussion threads for this assessable task.

Online role-play and simulation are not a panacea for group discussion on sensitive topics or issues. There are critical success factors that curriculum leaders need to take into consideration when designing online role-play and simulation for the study of business ethics. For example, teachers used to traditional classroom teaching must also become effective online instructors. They may have to acquire a new set of skills for student learning in the virtual learning environment such as technical skills in handling online tools, facilitating discussions in the virtual environment, and the ability to support the social and emotional well-being of the students in discussing sensitive topics or issues. Instructors involved in using online role play and simulation for discussion of sensitive topics need to be clear on the goal to be achieved, the limitations inherent

in the learning context, such as students' attitudes and cultural backgrounds, student's accessibility to technology and proficiency in using technology and resources constraints related to teaching support in their education institutions. Ground rules need to be established to ensure respectful and healthy discussion. Instructors as facilitators also need to ensure a balance of rigor and relevance in students' online discussions so that students develop the intended skills in a conducive learning environment. A coherent structure for discussion must constantly be maintained in order for real collaborative knowledge construction to take place.

Overall, developing the skills to engage effectively with the technology for online learning is an important requirement for students, curriculum developers and instructors. Therefore, effective preparation and training is crucial for all concerned so that everyone is confident in handling the online component in blended learning. Universities must also be prepared to support and invest resources and in particular to finance reliable ICT infrastructure, offer staff training and provide a supportive workload model that affords academic staff the additional time to master the skills required in blended learning.

Conclusion and Future Research Direction

In this paper, the author identifies role-play and simulation as appropriate learning techniques for dealing with sensitive topics and issues in a business ethics unit. The Audience Response System (ARS), online discussion boards and blogs, and wikis are assessed for their suitability in supporting online role-play and simulation. The anonymity, response-time flexibility and discussion structure in asynchronous online discussion boards and blogs are ideal for the intended learning purposes. However, the efficacy of staff and students in using these online technologies, a reliable ICT infrastructure, supportive workplace, and conducive virtual learning environment are also critical to the success of using online discussion boards and blogs for role-play and simulation.

There is no clear-cut learning strategy that will create an optimal learning environment and achieve student engagement in all situations. Although benefits have been associated with implementing blended learning strategy for student learning, there has been little publication on empirical research guiding the mix of online learning tools and formats that optimize blended learning for the study of business ethics. In the field of business ethics study, there is also a dearth of research in teaching strategies and learning approaches for units involving sensitive topics in blended learning. With limited guidance from research publication in these areas, achieving a proper balance between face-to-face learning and online learning in blended learning can be very time-consuming as contextual factors and resource constraints also need to be taken into consideration. However, curriculum leaders in designing business ethics study should continue to exploit the possibilities in technology for improving the quality of education and at the same time, share their experience in furthering our knowledge through publication and forum.

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Biography

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