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BALANCING CONVENIENCE AND CONNECTION: BLENDING LAW SCHOOL TEACHING AND LEARNING DURING A PANDEMIC

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I INTRODUCTION

Online we seem together,
yet at home we sit alone,
the knowledge that we miss,
is the friends that go unknown.¹

In February 2021, the Western Australian government placed the Perth metropolitan area into a ‘snap’ 5-day COVID-19 lockdown. This meant that the University of Western Australia (UWA) closed its campus, confining UWA Juris Doctor (JD) students to their homes. The lockdown coincided with the first week of a two-week intensive teaching block for the Law School’s Dispute Resolution unit, which as part of the School’s Legal Professionalism² initiative, was usually conducted on a relatively quiet campus in the two weeks immediately preceding the beginning of first semester.

The Legal Professionalism initiative provides the JD cohort with an immersive two-week experience of essential skills development, engagement with members of the profession, and opportunity to interact with their fellow students and Law School staff — *on campus*. Second-year students undertake the unit Dispute Resolution, which in the past has shown to have a positive impact on the students’ sense of belonging and engagement with the Law School.³ However, in 2021, the first week of the unit coincided with the lockdown. Consequently,

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¹ Poem from a student journal in the Dispute Resolution Class.

² An initiative in which the ‘professional’ units of Foundations of Law and Lawyering (1st year), DR (2nd year) and Professional Practice (3rd year) are taught intensively in the fortnight before Semester 1 begins.

³ Jill Howieson and William Ford, ‘Teaching and Learning Skills: Increasing a Sense of Law School Belongingness’ (Student Engagement: Proceedings of the 16th Annual Teaching Learning Forum, Perth, 30-31 January 2007) 1; Jill Howieson, ‘ADR Education: Creating Engagement and Increasing Mental Well-Being Through an Interactive and Constructive Approach’ (2011) 22 *Australasian Dispute Resolution Journal* 58, 60.

modification to the delivery of the course material was necessary to ensure that students could still engage with the experience.

Although UWA was able to quickly adapt to online teaching and learning during the height of the pandemic in Western Australia (peaking around April 2020),⁴ this new ‘snap’ lockdown created several dilemmas — as some online teaching was inevitable, the teaching staff wondered whether the online experience of teaching and learning in Dispute Resolution would yield the same impacts on student engagement and wellbeing as they had done over a decade earlier in a different higher education landscape. And further, the staff pondered over the best way to configure the teaching. As it was a short lockdown, the staff grappled with the question of how much teaching should be conducted online and how much should be face-to-face.

Whilst the broader consensus seems to be that there is no single ‘correct’ balance of how the two delivery styles should be blended, universities have had no choice but to act promptly in response to the pandemic. Internationally, universities have rapidly adopted online learning as an additional — or alternative — strategy to continue to deliver education to students.⁵ Anecdotally, this has been a variable process and has invited much discussion surrounding the rollout and impact on students across universities, and within universities as some courses adapt more effectively than others.⁶

The opportunity to explore the topic of blended learning in the skills-based Dispute Resolution context came when the Dean of the UWA Law School decided that the first week of the teaching block would be conducted online and the second week would be face-to-face on campus. This, therefore, seemed an ideal time for a study into the online experience for the DR students and its effect on the students’ learning, engagement and perhaps most importantly, on their wellbeing.

⁴ In 2020, the University moved all lecture delivery online by March 23 with online course delivery continuing through to end of semester on June 21. In 2021, Western Australia was subject to shorter five- (31 Jan – 5 Feb), three- (23 April – 27 April) and four-day lockdowns (29 Jun – 2 Jul) over the course of the year.

⁵ Maurizio Costabile, ‘Using Online Simulations to Teach Biochemistry Laboratory Content During COVID-19’ (2020) 48 *Biochemistry and Molecular Biology Education* 509; Roy Chan, *Online Teaching and Learning in Higher Education During COVID-19: International Perspectives and Experiences* (Routledge, 2021); Rahen Kakadia, Emily Chen and Hiroe Ohyama, ‘Implementing an Online OSCE During the COVID-19 Pandemic’ (2021) 85 *Journal of Dental Education* 1006; Nikola Luburić et al, ‘The Challenges of Migrating an Active Learning Classroom Online in a Crisis’ (2021) *Computer Applications in Engineering Education* 1.

⁶ Víctor García-Morales, Aurora Garrido-Moreno and Rodrigo Martín-Rojas, ‘The Transformation of Higher Education After the COVID Disruption: Emerging Challenges in an Online Learning Scenario’ (2021) 12 *Frontiers in Psychology* <<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.616059>>; Marcos García-Alberti et al, ‘Challenges and Experiences of Online Evaluation in Courses of Civil Engineering During the Lockdown Learning Due to the Covid-19 Pandemic’ (2021) 11 *Education Sciences* 1; Asamoah Debrah et al, ‘Online Instructional Experiences in An Unchartered Field – The Challenges of Student-Teachers of A Ghanaian College of Education’ (2021) 37 *Journal Of Digital Learning in Teacher Education* 99.

A Background

1 The 2007 and 2011 Studies

In 2007, Howieson and Ford conducted a study into student engagement, which identified that students who had undertaken the optional Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) unit exhibited a greater sense of belonging to the Law School and consequently a greater sense of engagement, compared to students who had not completed the unit.⁷ In 2011, a Howieson follow-up study showed that the individual significant predictor of ADR students' sense of belonging and mental health was *interaction with other students*. The more that the student enjoyed the interaction with the other students, the greater the student's sense of belonging and well-being.⁸

The 2011 study also showed that the level of students' enjoyment of the skills exercises, warm-ups, role-plays and interaction with other students and teachers predicted the level of the students' wellbeing. Further results of the study showed that the students felt that they achieved a higher level of skills learning if the tasks were meaningful, realistic, and related to practice. Taken together, these results are consistent with the broader education literature that emphasises the importance of student connection as a key predictor of student wellbeing,⁹ and opportunities for 'authentic' learning experiences as a key predictor of student engagement and motivation.¹⁰

In part as a response to the results of the 2007 and 2011 studies, the Law School converted the *optional* ADR unit to the *core* Dispute Resolution (DR) unit in 2013. Further, in 2015, the Law School introduced the Legal Professionalism initiative, which saw the

⁷ Howieson (n 3). Please note that in keeping with the DR community the unit has now changed to Dispute Resolution (DR). At the time of the study, the unit was still known as Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR).

⁸ Howieson and Ford (n 3).

⁹ Lili Tian et al, 'The Longitudinal Relationship Between School Belonging and Subjective Well-Being in School Among Elementary School Students' (2016) 11 *Applied Research in Quality of Life* 1269, 1271–72, 1280–81; Michèle Suhlmann et al, 'Belonging Mediates Effects of Student-University Fit on Well-Being, Motivation, and Dropout Intention' (2018) 49 *Social Psychology* 16, 18–19, 24; Oda Lekve Brandseth et al, 'Mental Well-Being Among Students in Norwegian Upper Secondary Schools: The Role of Teacher Support and Class Belonging' (2019) 28 *Norsk Epidemiologi* 49, 54; Yun Li et al, 'Testing the Associations among Social Axioms, School Belonging, and Flourishing in University Students: A Two-Year Longitudinal Study' (2020) 12 *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being* 749, 754, 763.

¹⁰ Brenda Leibowitz et al, 'Learning to Conduct Research by Doing: A Case Study in a Postgraduate Health Education Program' in Vivienne Bozalek et al (eds), *Activity Theory, Authentic Learning and Emerging Technologies: Towards a Transformative Higher Education Pedagogy* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2014) 74, 78; Yasaman Alioon and Ömer Delialioğlu, 'The Effect of Authentic M-Learning Activities on Student Engagement and Motivation: Authentic M-learning Activities' (2019) 50 *British Journal of Educational Technology* 655; Seyyed Kazem Banihashem et al, 'The Impacts of Constructivist Learning Design and Learning Analytics on Students' Engagement and Self-Regulation' (2021) *Innovations In Education and Teaching International* 1, 7.

‘professional’ units of DR, Foundations of Law and Lawyering, and Professional Practice, being taught in the intensive fortnight before the beginning of the semester proper and being taught more interactively than they had been previously. Even without the 2021 COVID lockdown, it seemed timely to investigate whether the results of these earlier studies would be replicated in a new era of legal education and what influence, if any, online teaching had on the students’ engagement and wellbeing.

2 *The Present Study*

The broad aim of this study was to explore how law students navigated a blended learning environment. Using the two-week DR unit as a case example, the study drew upon quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (self-reflection journals) to better understand the lived experiences of the law students. To a large extent, the study replicated the 2007 and 2011 studies, with the addition of updated engagement literature, which includes the cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions of engagement.¹¹

3 *Student Engagement*

Evidence presented in student engagement literature often references a psychological conceptualisation of engagement.¹² According to the seminal review produced by Fredricks and colleagues, student engagement includes cognitive, behavioural, and affective dimensions:¹³

Cognitive engagement is a reference to a student’s psychological investment in effort applied to academic tasks such as learning, understanding and mastery. Evidence of cognitive engagement can include students using deep learning strategies, exerting effort to produce high quality work, reflecting on, integrating and synthesizing concepts learned.¹⁴

¹¹ Jennifer Fredricks, Phyllis Blumenfeld and Alison Paris, ‘School Engagement: Potential of the Concept, State of the Evidence’ (2004) 74 *Review of Educational Research* 59, 62–65.

¹² Ibid. See also Caitlin Elsaesser et al, ‘The Longitudinal Relation Between Community Violence Exposure and Academic Engagement During Adolescence: Exploring Families’ Protective Role’ (2020) 35 *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 3264, 3267–3268; Andrew Denovan et al, ‘Future Time Perspective, Positive Emotions and Student Engagement: A Longitudinal Study’ (2020) 45 *Studies in Higher Education* 1533, 1535; Rui Zhen et al, ‘Trajectory Patterns of Academic Engagement Among Elementary School Students: The Implicit Theory of Intelligence and Academic Self-Efficacy Matters’ (2020) 90 *British Journal of Educational Psychology* 618, 622.

¹³ Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (n 11).

¹⁴ Ibid 61. See also Fadiyah Almutairi and Su White, ‘How to Measure Student Engagement in the Context of Blended-MOOC’ (2018) 15 *Interactive Technology and Smart Education* 262; Jennifer Fredricks, Tara Hofkens and Ming-Te Wang, ‘Addressing the Challenge of Measuring Student Engagement’ in Ann Renninger and Suzanne E. Hidi (eds), *The Cambridge Handbook of Motivation and Learning* (Cambridge University Press 2019) 690; Ming-Te Wang et al, ‘Conceptualization and Assessment of Adolescents’ Engagement and Disengagement in School’ (2019) 35 *European Journal of Psychological Assessment* 592, 593.

Behavioural engagement is characterised by compliance with behavioural norms such as attendance, involvement, and concentration as well as absence of negative or disruptive behaviours.¹⁵ In addition to attendance, acts such as asking questions and attending course related events are also demonstrations of this form of engagement.¹⁶

Affective (emotional) engagement encompasses the elements of a student's overall affective reaction to the academic environment.¹⁷ Experiencing enjoyment, interest, sense of belonging, boredom and anxiety are all indicia of this part of the engagement paradigm.¹⁸

The DR unit and its assessments were structured to capture elements of these dimensions of engagement. The unit included, amongst other strategies, critical reflections journals as a mode of assessment for cognitive engagement and used interactive role-play strategies and a group presentation project to contribute to the student's affective engagement. The use of tasks that require attendance to complete (the interactive role plays and group project) along with unrecorded lectures was intended to encourage behavioural engagement. The study aimed to capture measures of these dimensions and their impact on student wellbeing in both the online and face-to-face environments.

II MATERIALS AND METHODS

The LAWS5109 Dispute Resolution class ran from 8 to 19 February 2021. There were 212 students enrolled in the two-week intensive unit, which was conducted fully online via the Zoom platform in Week 1 and then fully on campus in Week 2. The course consisted of lectures, interactive exercises, role-plays, and group work as the students were placed in groups and prepared for their final Presentation which took place on campus on the final day of the course. The assessments for the unit included a Critical Reflection journal, the final Group Presentation and a take-home test conducted online at the conclusion of the teaching block.

The delivery of the unit implemented a blended approach to teaching. This blend was stratified into a Fully Online first week of content, and a Face-to-Face delivery style in Week Two. At the end of each teaching week, students were invited to complete the end-of-week survey items (see Table 1). This survey was hosted online via Qualtrics (www.Qualtrics.com). The average response times to complete the surveys was approximately 5 minutes ($M = 4$ minutes 40 seconds).

¹⁵ Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (n 11) 62. See also Fredricks, Hofkens and Wang (n 14) 690; Almutairi and White (n 14) 264; Centre for Adolescent Health et al, *Student Wellbeing, Engagement and Learning Across the Middle Years* (Dept. of Education and Training 2018) 15.

¹⁶ Ibid; Almutairi and White (n 14) 264.

¹⁷ Ibid; Wang (n 15) 593.

¹⁸ Almutari and White 2018 (n 14) 264; Wang (n 14) 593; Christopher Smith and Valeria Alonso, 'Measuring Student Engagement in the Undergraduate General Chemistry Laboratory' (2020) 21 *Chemistry Education Research and Practice* 399, 402.

Sixty-one students (29% of students enrolled) consented and completed the survey offered at the end of Week One (the *Fully Online* week). Thirty students (14% of students enrolled) consented and completed the survey offered at the end of Week Two (the *Face-to-Face* week).

A Measures

The end-of-week surveys were developed from the Howieson and Ford (2007), and Howieson (2011) studies.¹⁹ To ensure that all three elements of Fredricks' psychological conceptualisation of engagement were assessed, the 2007 and 2011 survey items were compared to the concepts of cognitive, behavioural, and affective engagement. After comparison, one additional item was added to assess cognitive engagement.

The cognitive engagement items seek to measure engagement indicated by willingness to exert effort to increase understanding of concepts (ie effort beyond that required only for task completion) and ability to reflect on skills developed through the unit and their potential integration for use beyond the unit setting.²⁰ Behavioural engagement was analysed using questions relating to attendance, preparation, and participation. The affective engagement component was captured by questions pertaining to boredom and sense of belonging. The current survey items are presented as part of Table 1. Superscripts indicate the component of engagement measured.

Sixteen items were prepared in two styles to reflect the delivery style in Week One (*Fully Online*) and Week Two (*Face-to-Face*). The remaining three items did not require modification between the two teaching weeks. There were 18 questions for Week One and 19 questions for Week Two — the last question in Week Two asked students to collectively reflect on the blending of the two teaching weeks of content. Items 9 and 14, which asked about skipped classes were coded on a six-point scale ranging from (1 = None to 6 = Five). All other items were coded on a five-point scale ranging from (1 = Strongly disagree to 5 = Strongly agree). One open-ended question was asked at the end of both surveys ('What additional comments or feedback do you have about this week's online/face-to-face learning?').

The Critical Reflection journal involved asking students to answer a series of five questions that were designed to give the students the opportunity to critically reflect upon their personal engagement with dispute resolution theory and practice. There was an optional question, 'Which do I prefer, online learning or face-to-face?'. Selected excerpts from the journals of some of students who answered the optional question were chosen to provide further insight to the students' experience of the two teaching and learning approaches across this course.

¹⁹ Howieson (n 3); Howieson and Ford (n 3).

²⁰ Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (n 11) 63–64; Smith and Alonso (n 18) 402–403.

B *Data Analysis*

A descriptive method of analysis was considered the appropriate method of enquiry due to the number of responses to Week 1 ($n = 61$) and Week 2 ($n = 30$) surveys. Inferential analyses to compare responses (e.g the paired samples t test) were not pursued due to the underpowered nature of the study. The decision was made to focus on descriptive comparisons as a preliminary form of analysis, coupled with evaluation of effect size (Cohen's d) — a measure of practical significance. The current analyses focus on observable trends in the available data that are further supplemented by a measure of effect whereby larger effect sizes denote a more detectable trend. By Cohen's conventions, a d statistic < 0.2 represents a small-effect, 0.5 represents a moderate-effect, and > 0.8 represents a large effect.²¹ All analyses were performed in version 25.0 of SPSS.

III RESULTS

Table 1 provides a detailed summary for the item descriptions, descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and range), and observed effect-size of the difference between average responses to Week One (*Fully Online*) and Week Two (*Face-to-Face*) survey items.

²¹ Jacob Cohen, 'A Power Primer' (1992) 112 *Psychological Bulletin* 155, 157.

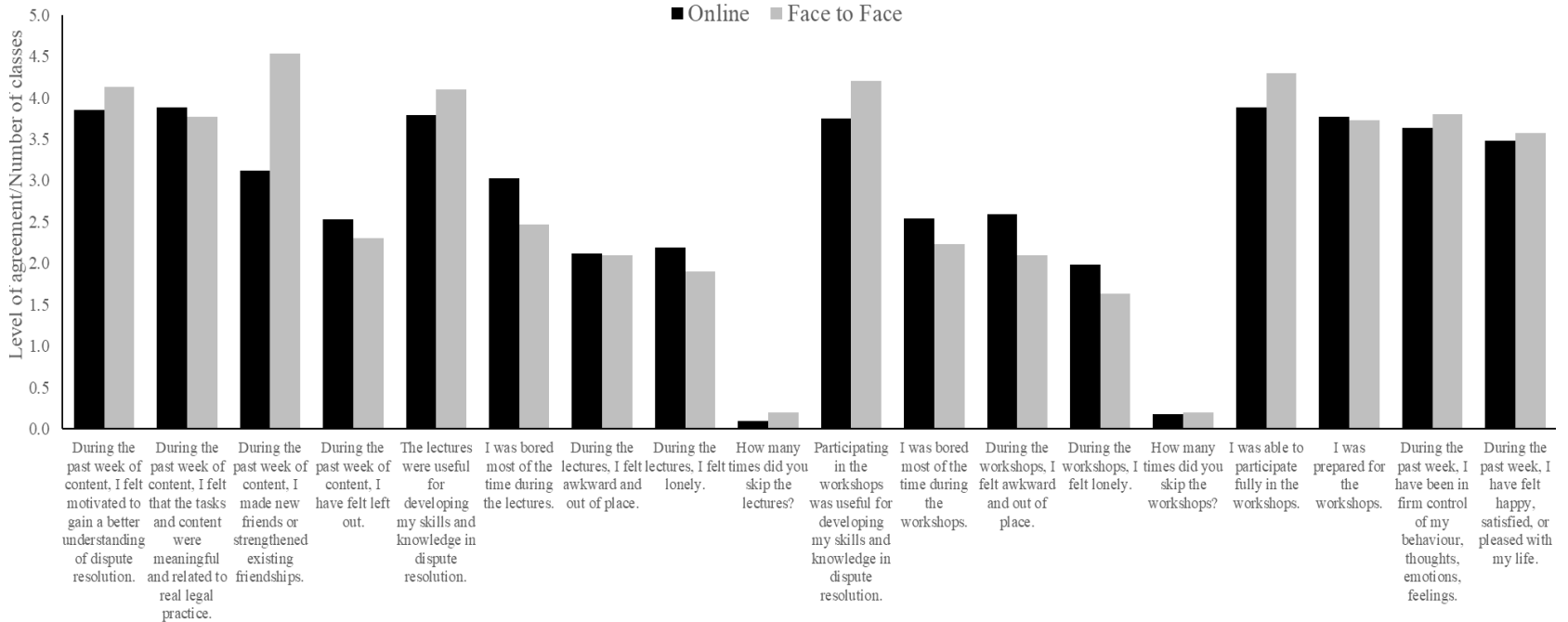
Table 1
Comparison of Responses to Week One (Fully Online) and Week Two (Face-to-Face) Alternative Dispute Resolution Course Module

Variable		Week One (Fully Online)					Week Two (Face-to-Face)					Effect
#	Item	N	M	SD	Range	Agree	N	M	SD	Range	Agree	<i>d</i>
1	During the past week of [Online/Face-To-Face] content, I felt motivated to gain a better understanding of dispute resolution. ^C	60	3.85	1.18	1 – 5	75%	30	4.13	1.17	1 – 5	80%	0.24
2	During the past week of [Online/Face-To-Face] content, I felt that the tasks and content were meaningful and related to real legal practice. ^C	60	3.88	1.17	1 – 5	75%	30	3.77	1.19	1 – 5	67%	-0.09
3	During the past week of [Online/Face-To-Face] content, I made new friends or strengthened existing friendships. ^A	61	3.12	1.34	1 – 5	49%	30	4.53	0.9	1 – 5	90%	1.26
4	During the past week of [Online/Face-To-Face] content, I have felt left out. ^A	60	2.53	1.16	1 – 5	25%	30	2.3	1.21	1 – 4	23%	-0.19
5	The [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures were useful for developing my skills and knowledge in dispute resolution. ^C	58	3.79	0.97	1 – 5	74%	30	4.1	1.06	1 – 5	80%	0.31
6	I was bored most of the time during the [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures. ^B	58	3.03	1.3	1 – 5	45%	30	2.47	1.33	1 – 5	27%	-0.43
7	During the [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures, I felt awkward and out of place. ^A	58	2.12	1.19	1 – 5	21%	30	2.10	1.24	1 – 5	13%	-0.2
8	During the [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures, I felt lonely. ^A	58	2.19	1.44	1 – 5	22%	30	1.90	1.06	1 – 4	13%	-0.23
9	How many times did you skip the [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures? ^B	58	0.09	0.28	0 – 1	-	30	0.20	0.48	0 – 2	-	0.29
10	Participating in the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops was useful for developing my skills and knowledge in dispute	56	3.75	1.1	2 – 5	71%	30	4.20	0.92	1 – 5	80%	0.45

Variable		Week One (Fully Online)					Week Two (Face-to-Face)					Effect
#	Item	N	M	SD	Range	Agree	N	M	SD	Range	Agree	<i>d</i>
	resolution. ^C											
11	I was bored most of the time during the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops. ^B	56	2.54	1.14	1 – 5	25%	30	2.23	1.22	1 – 5	23%	-0.26
12	During the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops, I felt awkward and out of place. ^A	56	2.59	1.32	1 – 5	34%	30	2.10	0.84	1 – 4	10%	-0.45
13	During the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops, I felt lonely. ^A	56	1.98	1.17	1 – 5	9%	30	1.63	0.76	1 – 4	3%	-0.36
14	How many times did you skip the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops? ^B	56	0.18	0.39	0 – 1	-	30	0.20	0.48	0 – 2	-	0.05
15	I was able to participate fully in the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops. ^B	56	3.88	0.9	2 – 5	79%	30	4.30	0.65	3 – 5	90%	0.54
16	I was prepared for the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops. ^B	56	3.77	0.99	2 – 5	66%	30	3.73	1.08	1 – 5	70%	-0.04
17	During the past week, I have been in firm control of my behaviour, thoughts, emotions, feelings. ^A	56	3.64	1.17	1 – 5	68%	30	3.80	1.03	2 – 5	70%	0.15
18	During the past week, I have felt happy, satisfied, or pleased with my life. ^A	56	3.48	1.18	1 – 5	55%	30	3.57	1.1	1 – 5	60%	0.08
19	Thinking back over the unit, the blend of face-to-face and online teaching and learning worked well.	-	-	-	-	-	30	3.17	1.56	1 – 5	53%	-

Note. $d < 0.2$ is a small effect, $d = 0.5$ is a moderate effect, $d > 0.80$ is a large effect. % Agree = proportion of respondents who either strongly agree or agree with the statement. A subscript is included to denote questions that measure different components of engagement (Cognitive = C, Behavioural = B, Affective = A).

Figure 1
Visual Representation of Average Responses to Each of the Survey Items Administered in Week One (Fully Online) and Week Two (Face-to-Face) Delivery of the Two-Week Dispute Resolution Course. Note: Variable names have been shortened for greater ease of interpretation.



A *Cognitive engagement (motivation to improve understanding and reflection on skills/knowledge learned)*

There was a moderately-sized difference in response to the following item regarding motivation, ‘During the past week of [Online/Face-To-Face] content, I felt motivated to gain a better understanding of dispute resolution’. The pattern of results was indicative of a trend toward higher levels of motivation for the face-to-face content compared to the online content. However, levels of motivation remained high for both online (75% agreement) and face-to-face delivery (80% agreement).

Mean responses to the following item, ‘During the past week of [Online/Face-To-Face] content, I felt that the tasks and content were meaningful and related to real legal practice’ for online and face-to-face delivery modes were very similar ($M = 3.88$ for fully online, $M = 3.77$ for face-to-face), further supported by a very small effect size ($d = -0.09$). This suggests that delivery mode may not impact the overall interpretation of whether information is meaningful for future legal practice.

Mean responses to the items ‘Participating in the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops was useful for developing my skills and knowledge in dispute resolution’ and ‘The [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures were useful for developing my skills and knowledge in dispute resolution’ modelled a similar trend toward a moderately-sized difference in responses with a preference toward face-to-face workshops.

B *Behavioural Engagement (Attendance, Preparation and Participation)*

Mean responses to the two items relating to attendance (‘How many times did you skip the [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures?’ and ‘How many times did you skip the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops?’) between online and face-to-face delivery modes were comparable. This trend suggests that the attendance of students may not be impacted by delivery mode.

A moderately-sized difference in mean responses to the item ‘I was able to participate fully in the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops’ and noticeable difference in levels of agreement to that statement (79% for online; 90% for face-to-face) demonstrated a trend that suggested that there may be important differences in student’s ability to participate in workshops delivered online compared to face-to-face.

Mean responses to the item ‘I was prepared for the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops’ were very similar for the online and face-to-face modes of delivery. Further, there were similar levels of agreement to the item across both delivery modes and only a very small effect-size between responses.

C *Affective Engagement (Boredom and Belonging)*

There was a moderately-sized difference in the mean responses to the statement ‘I was bored most of the time during the [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures’, with responses trending toward higher levels of boredom for lectures delivered online compared to face-to-face. However, mean responses to the same item about workshops (‘I was bored most of the time during the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops’) were more consistent across the two delivery modes and with a small effect size.

Six items captured student sense of belonging (See items 3, 4, 7, 8, 12, and 13 in Table 1). The pattern of results was indicative of either a trend toward higher levels of belonging during the face-to-face style of delivery or no difference between the two delivery methods.

The mean difference between mean responses to ‘During the past week of [ONLINE/FACE-TO-FACE] content, I made new friends or strengthened existing friendships’ yielded a large effect whereby students during the face-to-face week of delivery reported substantially higher agreement ($M = 4.53$; 90% agreement) compared to the response to the online week of delivery ($M = 3.12$; 49% agreement).

Mean responses to ‘During the past week of [Online/Face-To-Face] content, I have felt left out’, ‘During the [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures, I felt awkward and out of place’, ‘During the [Online/Face-To-Face] lectures, I felt lonely’ across the two delivery methods were largely comparable, as exemplified through the very small effect-sizes (ie the differences between average responses yield very little practical significance) and comparable average scores. The comparable nature of these responses may be an indication that the traditional lecture may be conducive to similar levels of student belonging irrespective of online or face-to-face delivery. However, it is important to note that average responses across both statements demonstrated low levels of agreement.

There were moderately-sized differences between the items comparing online and face-to-face workshops: ‘During the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops, I felt awkward and out of place’, and ‘During the [Online/Face-To-Face] workshops, I felt lonely’. Compared to the responses to lecture questions, this pattern of responses suggested a trend toward a greater sense of student belonging in the face-to-face workshops compared to the online workshops.

D *Wellbeing*

Mean responses to the two indicators of student wellbeing: ‘During the past week, I have been in firm control of my behaviour, thoughts, emotions, feelings’ and ‘During the past week, I have felt happy, satisfied, or pleased with my life’ were very similar across both styles of teaching delivery, as indicated by similar means, similar proportions of statement agreement and small effect sizes. These findings suggest that wellbeing was consistent across the two teaching weeks of online

and face-to-face delivery, with responses indicating that the students' overall sense of wellbeing was relatively high.

E *Overall Impression of Blended Delivery*

Respondents also responded to a single item regarding their overall impression of the blending of online and face-to-face content ('Thinking back over the unit, the blend of face-to-face and online teaching and learning worked well'). Ratings from the 30 students were generally mixed — 16 students demonstrated agreement with this statement and 13 students disagreed with the statement, with one student declining to respond.

F *Commentary from Journal Activity*

The commentary from the journals and the open-ended question on the surveys supports this mixed, or perhaps paradoxical, response. On the one-hand, students liked the idea of rolling out of bed in their pyjamas, acquiring the self-discipline required of online learning, being able to listen to lectures in their own time and in their own way, and avoiding the stress of traffic and parking. On the other hand, they also liked walking around the beautiful campus grounds, they liked the physicality of talking directly to people, and the productivity that came from the face-to-face learning. These ideas are encapsulated by the following statements made by students in their journals and open-ended survey responses.

Online learning is attractive in the sense of convenience; not having to stress about trivial matters like finding carparks or traveling (sic) in peak traffic. I love watching lectures online because I can speed up slow talkers or stop the recording to write notes, granting me independence to operate at my own pace. Online lectures also eliminate the distractions of the classroom environment. (Student 1)

In the end, face-to-face learning is the best option for me. ... I get to see my friends, the beautiful campus, and I get to interact with UWA's clubs. Face-to-face will always be my first preference. (Student 2)

I can say without a doubt that I enjoyed the second week more than the first week of the unit. This week made me feel confident, happy, and energised... I made so many new friends in the second week ... Secondly I enjoyed being on campus surrounded by other people. I appreciated being able to go for long walks along Matilda Bay. (Student 3)

Online learning allows me to study remotely and in my own time. All I need is a good and stable internet connection. While attending classes or listening to the lecture, I can do household chores such as the laundry, run the dishwasher, and even do some food prep and cooking. Saving me so much time when such chores are usually done early in the morning or late at night providing for more time to study and prepare for classes in the day. (Student 4)

Having face-to-face learning ultimately boosted my mood and self-confidence because my struggles were validated by my peers. Because I felt

happier, I was also more productive in my study. In a collegiate degree like the JD, peer interaction is integral to my education & wellbeing. Online learning is isolating and detrimental to this. (Student 5)

Online studies, particularly at law school, have taught me the importance of self-discipline. In this unit, I got a different feel and experience of online studies. I loved the fact that it was a live class compared to recorded lectures in the previous semester. I appreciated the fact that students could interact, share opinions, and ask live questions. The virtual breakout room for the workshop role-play was also a great experience. ... I do prefer face-to-face or a blend of the two. I can concentrate more without any distractions in a face-to-face class. (Student 6)

Compared to viewing lectures online from home. The physical component of face-to-face studies is also appealing to me. ... emails fall short in replacing the value of real-time conversations you can have with professors and course mates. Additionally, with face-to-face lectures, I can ask questions and clear up any misunderstandings at the run time and get instant feedback. Also, ... I get a deeper understanding of lectures and answers to questions (Student 6)

Looking back at our group presentation in this unit, we used an online platform to discuss and share ideas in week 1. I realized that we were a bit all over the place, but once we met physically in week two, we connected very well as a team and became very efficient in our presentation preparation. Reflecting on this, I wondered if I was the only one who felt this way towards online studies. I had conversations with other course mates, friends, and family pursuing education to know their thoughts on this matter. Interestingly, most shared the same sentiments with me. The main concern that came up was the loss of physical interaction with the online mode of studies. (Student 6)

I have previously found myself reverting to online shopping and planning holidays during [face-to-face] classes ... Although, I find the content interesting, I get bored. Perhaps, this is due to my constant need to be entertained. ... When COVID-19 forced university from home, I became acquainted with online learning. It was initially fun to play around with new technologies, but the feeling was short-lived. I wanted the opportunity to make friends, something I never aimed to do in my undergraduate years. ... However, not being physically around people did not help the situation. This year, Dispute Resolution provided an opportunity to confirm my new preference of face-to-face learning. The first week online, I lacked motivation to leave my bed and get dressed. Organisation of the group presentation proved challenging in an online environment. During the face-to-face week, our group was super productive. We wrote the script, found empirical evidence, and managed to conduct run throughs. I now have a greater appreciation of face-to-face learning as it provides a sense of community with like-minded people. I also recognise the importance of social interaction for both my mental health and academic performance at university. You will now see me trying to attend every class (Student 1)

[Letter to younger self] Until 2021, you hadn't tried online learning. You can be a bit traditionalist and you were secretly quite pleased to miss the 2020 university year taught online. But then lockdown hit, you stayed home, and you tried it. No more could you avoid the reality of the 21st century. You logged into zoom. You'd been a teacher on zoom, but never a student. You dressed for the occasion and wore your best pyjamas (no

holes). Class would start at 10, you'd be up at 9:55. You thought this suited well, but in fact that thought was a lie. You lost your rhythm, routine and enthusiasm. What gets you out of bed in the morning is not a class, it's people ... (Student 7)

Online learning for you was a detached experience. You value the human connection. Some of your best friends in the world are from law school, you didn't like them when you met them because of what they said, but rather how they said it. You value the intensives at the start of the year. In your undergrad, every week was an intensive. All of the musicians would be at every class, every rehearsal, every party, every concert. You got to know them in the breaks between, the stolen minutes whilst the slides were prepared. The time that the brass should have been using to tune their chords. In law school that changed, the cohort was bigger, and everyone seemed to know everyone. Add to that online learning that got the content through but took away the brief brilliant illuminations of human spirit. The cohort became an amorphous mess of thumbnail pictures and segments of names. The law is a profession not a job, your peers are the ones you will one day send that negotiation letter to. ... (Student 7)

IV DISCUSSION

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of students with blended learning. The results show that in the 2021 Dispute Resolution class, boredom still exists, students sometimes do not attend lectures, and the students are generally prepared for class, whether the classes are online or face-to-face. However, the results also show that face-to-face learning may create a greater sense of belonging for students, a greater opportunity for the students to make new friends and/or strengthen existing friendships and may better help the students to develop their skills and knowledge in dispute resolution. Viewed through the lens of Fredricks' model of engagement, the findings provide some support for the proposition that law school students experience moderately higher levels of affective and cognitive engagement when participating in face-to-face.

In this study, the face-to-face classes offered greater opportunities for interaction. However, it is important to note that previous research demonstrates that online delivery does not preclude the ability to be interactive or engaging.²² For example, Moulds recently detailed positive feedback for elements of course design such as 'peer-to-peer learning experiences' and 'creative experimentation with role-play activities' in the University of South Australia's delivery of a first-year

²² Christopher Aylwin, 'Faculty And Student Interaction in an Online Master's Course: Survey and Content Analysis' (2019) 21 *Journal of Medical Internet Research* <<https://doi.org/10.2196/10464>>; Geesje van den Berg, 'Context Matters: Student Experiences of Interaction in Open Distance Learning' (2020) 21 *The Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education* 223, 229–230; Trang Nguyen et al, 'Insights Into Students' Experiences and Perceptions of Remote Learning Methods: From the COVID-19 Pandemic to Best Practice for the Future' (2021) 6 *Frontiers in Education* <<https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.647986>>.

legislation unit.²³ The unit is taught both online and intensively face-to-face.

Similar positive outcomes were reported in an earlier study of an online ‘Indigenous Australians and the Law’ unit delivered at the University of New England, New South Wales.²⁴ In that study, ninety-one percent of surveyed students reported the facilitation of online collaboration created a feeling of an ‘online learning community’ and reduced any feelings of isolation. Students also reported experiencing ‘learning as a social endeavour’ with online, collaborative learning providing the opportunity to meet and connect with their peers.²⁵

Overall, the results of the current study corroborate the findings of the 2007 and 2011 studies and mirrors the research in the field. An interactive learning environment can create a sense of belonging, engagement, and mental ease. Our findings confirm that the interactive nature of the DR unit and the enjoyment and nature of the exercises, role-plays and the work with fellow students are associated with a more positive sense of wellbeing.

It is probably not surprising that students being face-to-face physically have a greater opportunity to make new friends — particularly in a course that makes use of group-based activities. However, the DR unit is also structured to include a group presentation assessment where on the first day (Monday) students are allocated to the groups and then work with their group members every day over the fortnight until the last day of the course (Friday) when they present their work. There were 10 students to each group and students in their debriefing paragraph on the group work indicated that the groups mostly consisted of students who hadn’t met each other before. The group work is deliberately structured for the students to meet new people. Time is allocated for the groups to work together before or after their workshops, and in the workshops, the group members are also often placed with each other for the role-plays.

In 2021, the students met their group members for the first time online and then worked with them online for the first week. The result that the students made new friends or strengthened friendships during the second week seems to indicate that it is easier to form stronger relationships when people meet physically. Indeed, comments in the debriefing paragraphs suggested that while it was great to ‘break the ice’ with the group members in the first week online, it was easier to communicate and work together when they were face-to-face.

While the results suggest a general trend toward higher levels of motivation for the face-to-face content compared to the online content, it was pleasing to see that the students found the lectures and workshops useful for developing knowledge and skills in dispute resolution, and

²³ Sarah Moulds, ‘Visible Learning at Law School: An Australian Approach to Improving Teacher Impact in Intensive and Online Courses’ (2020) *Law Teacher* 1, 15–16 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/03069400.2020.1733358>>.

²⁴ Lisa Bugden, P. Redmond and J. Greaney, ‘Online Collaboration as a Pedagogical Approach to Learning and Teaching Undergraduate Legal Education’ (2018) *Law Teacher* 85, 93.

²⁵ *Ibid* 93–94.

that the students found the knowledge and skills meaningful for future legal practice — irrespective of delivery mode. This is especially pleasing when taken with the results that this knowledge and the skills come with a sense of belonging, engagement, and mental well-being. However, it is also important to acknowledge that not all students who completed the course responded to the survey.

V LIMITATIONS

While the results seem to accord with previous studies that show that students might have difficulties forming a sense of belonging and have increased experiences of loneliness in an online setting compared to a face-to-face environment²⁶ the small scale to which this blended delivery was evaluated means that while our findings can offer some interesting insights, alone they are insufficient to merit definitive conclusions. Perhaps the most pressing limitation is one of representativeness. Of the 212 students who completed the two-week course, approximately 29% completed the survey in the first week, and 14% completed the survey in the second week. It is not clear the extent to which those students represent their broader cohort. However, it is fortunate that part of the results garnered from the journal activity were completed by the entire cohort. A future initiative may be to dedicate in-class time at the end of both weeks to complete the survey, rather than to have students complete this information in their own time. Increased responses could afford the ability to analyse the data using inferential statistics, in addition to gaining greater representativeness.

VI CONCLUSION

This article describes the results of a study designed to examine the effect of the blended delivery of a two-week dispute resolution course taken by law students attending UWA Law School. The decision to blend the delivery by having a fully online first-week and face-to-face second week was motivated by external circumstances — namely the snap 5-day lockdown introduced by the WA Government in response to the threat of COVID-19.

The results show a preference toward face-to-face workshops due to the increased sense of belonging and well-being that develops from these. The results are also consistent with other recent research that

²⁶ Timon Elmer, Kieran Mephram and Christoph Stadtfeld, 'Students Under Lockdown: Comparisons of Students' Social Networks And Mental Health Before and During the COVID-19 Crisis in Switzerland ' (2020) 15 *PLoS One* <<https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0236337>>; Chris Lambert and Allan Rennie, 'Experiences from COVID-19 and Emergency Remote Teaching for Entrepreneurship Education in Engineering Programmes' (2021) 11 *Education Sciences* 282, 292; Susan Parker, Mary Hansen and Carianne Bernadowski, 'COVID-19 Campus Closures in the United States: American Student Perceptions of Forced Transition to Remote Learning' (2021) 10 *Social Sciences* (Basel) 62, 75–76; Michał Wilczewski, Oleg Gorbanjuk and Paola Giuri, 'The Psychological and Academic Effects of Studying From the Home and Host Country During the COVID-19 Pandemic' (2021) 12 *Frontiers in Psychology* 1, 6.

suggests that, whilst difficult, some preservation of face-to-face learning in an online world may be a worthwhile endeavour to the benefit of students.²⁷ These findings highlight a potential challenge for higher education providers, who may find it difficult to satisfy the student preferences for face-to-face learning in a post-pandemic higher education setting. While we acknowledge the limitations to generalising this result, it is interesting to note that the preference seems to come with some wistfulness on the part of the students. It seems that the students wanted to physically be on campus with people but without having to give up the conveniences of online. Issues such as commuting, parking, and dressing for class disappeared with online learning but so it seemed did the human connection. The challenge for universities now, is how to strike a balance of convenience with connection.

While future research can investigate closely what the right balance and blend for online and face-to-face teaching and learning might be, it seems clear that, for the students, the most important thing for their wellbeing is being physically with their peers. Whether they are in their pyjamas, writing poetry or uninspired by the parking situation of UWA, students appreciate, or one might go as far as saying, *need*, interaction with their peers. And that means, it seems, physical interaction not through a computer screen. One supposes that students and teachers might have to wait until virtual reality puts the students online but still in the classroom before students are able to enjoy the best of both worlds.

²⁷ Kevin S. Krug et al, 'Student Preference Rates for Predominately Online, Compressed, or Traditionally Taught University Courses' (2016) 41 *Innovative Higher Education* 255, 264–265; Alenka Tratnik, Marko Urh and Eva Jereb, 'Student Satisfaction with an Online and a Face-To-Face Business English Course in a Higher Education Context' (2019) 56 *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 36, 39–40; Samiullah Dost et al, 'Perceptions of Medical Students Towards Online Teaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A National Cross-Sectional Survey Of 2721 UK Medical Students' (2020) 10 *BMJ Open*. <<https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-042378>>.