

Learning to practice in two dimensions

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What is the relationship between physical and virtual spaces in relation to learning – is cyberspace a place for learning?

Spaces for learning have always gone beyond the classroom and tension has always existed between academic and practice in both trades and professions. In today's world these learning spaces remain contentious. Once the arbiter of formal, codified knowledge; Universities teaching postgraduate law have stepped into professional spaces where tacit knowledge was previously restricted to the domain of the law firm. The debate in legal education about the best way to learn the profession rages on; but the focus has moved from the classroom vs practice to physical space vs cyberspace. Stakeholders remain concerned that an increase in online learning has increased the gap between declarative and procedural knowledge.

As growing numbers of graduate law students compete for law placements limited by downturns in the economy, we argue that online learning can close, rather than widen, the gap between the declarative and procedural knowledge. At ANU College of Law we reinvent physical spaces in the virtual world, placing our law students into virtual lecture theatres, tutorials and offices. From their first experience in the programme with an orientation week, to their peer learning in a virtual office environment and final 'real client', students are exposed to both formal academic theory of law and the practical aspects of dealing with real cases and clients. Through careful curriculum design, drawing on the work of Eraut, Maharg and Anderson we have focused on best practice in pedagogy, information architecture and communication, to empower students in cyberspace to become practitioners in the real world.