

EUNIS 2008: “carrot & stick” - Inter-Active e-Learning at the Copenhagen Law Faculty

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1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In January of 2007 a new learning management system was introduced at the University of Copenhagen after an EU tender process. The intention of the University is that all courses should include activities and information supported by the learning management system. In the beginning of 2007 some courses at the Faculty of Law started to include electronic learning activities in order to supplement the learning in the classroom/lecture hall. The successful implementation of the learning management system was initially driven by the ideas of a professor and was later enforced by a combination of several activities: design of a plan for dissemination of knowledge about how to use the system, an agreement of a common practise for the use of the learning management system organized by a professor, the introduction of a limited number of templates to assist the teachers when they design their courses and finally a combination of various learning elements/objects was included in the templates in order to introduce various didactic methods.

One example is the upper level (MA) course in “Comparative and Commercial law” which accepts 25-30 students where approximately 70-90% are foreign exchange students. The course offers four on-site class-hours pr. week (34 hours in all). The teaching is mainly based on the “Case-method”. The program also includes “hands-on” exercises using on-line material and the learning management systems “test”-element. The students are expected to be active both in class and in the virtual space of the learning management system. The methods used to activate the students in both the physical and virtual space include the following:

- 1) When the course starts, each student must create a personal “Participant” folder in the learning management system with a photo and a brief note “about me”.
- 2) In order to ensure preparation and understanding of relevant course material, as well as active participation, the students are expected to complete one or more e-exercises (posted in the learning management system) prior to each class.
- 3) When preparing for the class the lecturer looks through the statistics of the test results and then focuses the teaching on subjects where the students have shown weaknesses.
- 4) Each student must also make a 20 minute oral Team presentation (two students per team, 40 min total) on a specific topic. In advance of the oral presentation, the material must be made available to the other students using the learning management system. Only students who make a “satisfactory” presentation are permitted to take the final exam (see 5 below).
- 5) The final exam is a test conducted in the learning management system using the same test-tools and similar structure as the e-exercises. The final exam is preceded by a “Trial Exam” with similar features.

Conclusion

The “sticks” (i.e. elements of mandatory participation: steps 1,2 and 4) ensure that the students become familiar and confident not only with each other and the learning management system but also with the required course materials and the student-presentations. The key “carrot” (incentive) underlying this approach is that the course activities are designed to advance the students own needs. The exercises can help facilitate understanding and skill-training throughout the course, while the final e-exam ensures that the students’ knowledge is examined in a modern learning environment and assessed within the same frame. The result is a course with a high satisfaction level amongst the students.

2. E-learning at the University of Copenhagen

With its more than 525 years, the University of Copenhagen is one of the oldest universities in Northern Europe. The university admits more than 6,000 students a year and a total of more than 37000 students are active participants in educational activities each year. The educations are offered by eight faculties offering more than 200 study programs covering health sciences, humanities, law, life sciences, pharmaceutical sciences, natural science, social sciences, and theology. The university as a whole does not have a long tradition for e-learning or web-assisted learning, probably due to a lack of need for long-distance learning because of the short geographical distances in Denmark and a previously limited interest in international education. However, several courses have used web-based tools to support education and in 2007 a new learning management system (LMS) was licensed after an EU tender process. This LMS is intended to be used by all eight faculties and all study programs latest 2009. At present five of the eight faculties have made the transition from different platforms to the joint LMS and the overall intention is that all courses at the university include activities supported by the LMS in order to support and hopefully enhance the learning process.

Currently, the ambition in many courses is “only” to make syllabus information available and to use the LMS as a course-material repository. In the process of changing the use of LMS from a platform for document delivery to an interactive environment various barriers have to be overcome. Examples are; some teachers find it time-consuming, others cannot see the relevance and benefit within their subject or they just find it too complicated to prepare material and use the LMS. However, several of these concerns of the teachers can be reduced by the inspiration from enthusiastic colleagues, the existence of an organization for e-didactics and technical support on-site as well as recognition of and rewards for the development of LMS based activities

Despite the above mentioned barriers we sometimes see the development of excellent initiatives and often it originates from work/ideas produced by a single or a few persons. We will here present a case from the Faculty of Law, University of Copenhagen where the work of a single idealistic person disseminated from a single course to the group of teachers responsible for the BA courses. Next - in “The Case story” - we will present how a course Comparative Commercial Law was designed and implemented and in “Discussion” we will describe how this later on was used as an inspiration and a catalyst for the entire faculty.

2.1 The case story

The upper level (MA) course in “Comparative and Commercial law” (10 ECTS) accepts 25-30 students where approximately 70-90% are foreign exchange students (many of them not familiar with University of Copenhagen when they are enrolled in the course). The course offers four on-site class-hours each week (34 hours in all) and during the on-site classes and as preparation for the work that the students must do at home, access to the internet in general and to the LMS course-page is mandatory.

The course structure is modular and class-oriented in the sense that all course-material such as assignments, e-exercises, notes, links and other resources relevant for each class is organized within a folder with the name of the class, e.g. class# (Fig.1).

The course structure also includes a participant folder where the students present themselves with pictures and their motivation for choosing this particular course.

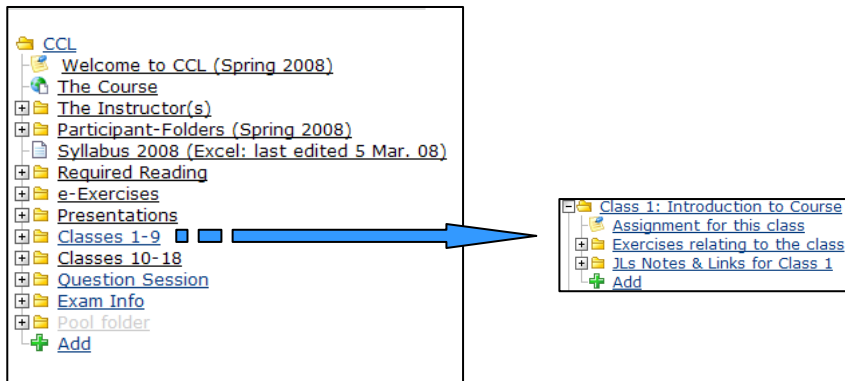


Figure 1 - Screen shot of the course structure for CCL

The teaching is based on the "Case-method". The program also includes "hands-on" exercises using on-line material & the LMS test-tools. The students are expected to be active both in class and in the virtual space of the LMS. The different "sticks and carrots" used to activate the students in both the physical and the virtual space are the following:

Before the course starts each student creates a personal "Participant" folder in the learning management system with a photo and a brief note "about me" (describing his/her background, main interests and why the student chose this course). The creation of their personal folder is mandatory for the students - the first "stick experience" - and the "carrots" are the opportunity to become familiar both with the LMS and with the other students. The folder is also useful to the students before making decisions about the teams for the oral presentation during the course.

Each student must make a 20 minute oral Team presentation (two students per team, 40 min in total) on a specific topic. The student teams must make their notes available in the LMS at the latest the day before class. This is mandatory partly because it is expected that the other students prepare for that specific case and the correspondent presentation at home in order to participate in the on-site discussion and to give valuable feed-back to the teams. The benefit of the "stick" here is a prepared and active audience.

In order to ensure preparation and understanding of relevant course material as well as active participation, the students are also expected to complete one or more "tests" - e-exercises -(posted in the LMS) prior to each class. About half of and up to 2/3 of the students complete these tests that contain about 3-5 questions each and they serve a number of valuable functions for both teacher and students. Although students are not required to do the exercises (they do not "count" as part of the course grade), the exercises can serve as means of assessing their understanding of the required reading and help facilitate understanding (provided they are done on time) which leads to better-prepared and more active students in class. In addition to this the students do better at the exam having taken the e-exercises. The teacher looks through the statistics of the test results and then focuses the teaching on subjects where the students have shown weaknesses. When the teacher has prepared the class and have identified problems exposed in the e-exercise he can also give individual feedback according to the results in the test. Even though feedback is not given on an individual basis the teacher's response to the difficulties for the main group will create a sense amongst the students (belonging to this group) that they have got an individual response.

All in all the students and the teacher can focus on the more interesting - and often more difficult subjects - an obvious "carrot".

Before the final exam/test the students have the possibility to take a trial-exam/test. This trial exam (and the final) are both constructed in the LMS using the same element/tool as in the e-exercises. The structure of the exam-questions is also familiar to the e-exercises. The e-exam ensures that the student's knowledge is examined and skills are trained in a modern learning environment and assessed within the same frame. A discussion-board is offered for both trial and

final exam so that the students can post questions related to the tests concerning for example ambiguity in the questions. The discussion-board also gives the students the opportunity to discuss the questions and the interpretations with each other. In addition to this the teacher also receives valuable information via the discussion-board and can over time improve the quality of the question-pool.

In summary, the benefits of combining on-site classes (presentations and discussions) and LMS activities in this course are to the students the ability to assess their understanding of the requirements and for the teacher the possibility to understand the students and their academic needs.

2.2 Discussion about the organizational framework and future challenges

The case described above demonstrates how blended mode/interactive (e)-learning can be implemented successfully in an upper-level course Comparative Commercial Law at the Faculty of Law. The following illustrates how successful cases and enthusiastic teachers act as catalysts in the process of disseminating the use of learning activities in the LMS and the development of a support structure.

The professor, the coordinators and their captains

The professor who created the course described in the case above became the Faculty of Law coordinator for Web Based Learning (WBL) due to his interest in the change from one-way communication via a home-page to interactivity via an LMS (starting with a former system in 2006). This WBL coordinator later worked with his successor (another law professor) to establish a forum for the dissemination of the experiences and good-practice amongst the teachers at the Faculty. Teachers responsible for each BA and MA course year were appointed “captains”. Based on the template of the CCL course (the case) and ideas from the captains a limited number of templates were developed to be used by all teachers for the design of their courses. To inspire the teachers these professors arranged a workshop for the whole Faculty and presented the templates and cases for the use of the LMS.

Organizational support for the process

These initiatives were followed by initiatives by the Dean of the Law Faculty and Leader of Studies. The development of further ideas regarding use of digital exams was supported by special funding. The Faculty now offers technical and didactic LMS support to the teachers. The ultimate goal is that all Law Faculty teachers should use the LMS, both at the BA and at the Masters programme. Thus, the initiatives originally driven by key enthusiastic individuals will result in an increasing level of inter-active learning activities and thereby provide a better learning experience for the students.

2.3 Conclusion

The presented case demonstrates both at the level of the course as well as the level of the organization, how “carrots and (a few) sticks” can facilitate the development of LMS based learning activities.

The CCL approach offers an opportunity of mutual understanding between students and teachers and to align student and teacher expectations.

The inspiration from successful and motivated teachers, the possibility of disseminating local “good practices” and the establishment of a support structure by the faculty leadership demonstrates how the barriers to e-learning can be overcome.